

# BEYOND FICTION

STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS  
by Roy Hutchins

No. 10  
35c

EDITED BY  
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# BEYOND FANTASY FICTION

Vol. 2, No. 4 • Issue No. 10

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BEYOND Fantasy Fiction is published bi-monthly by Galaxy Publishing Corporation. Main offices: 421 Hudson Street, New York 14, N. Y. 35c per copy. Subscriptions: (6 copies) \$2.00 in the United States, Canada, Mexico, South and Central America and U. S. Possessions. Elsewhere \$2.50. Entry as second-class matter applied for at New York post office. Copyright 1955, by Galaxy Publishing Corporation. All rights, including translation, reserved. All material submitted must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelopes. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited material. All stories printed in this magazine are fiction, and any similarity between characters and actual persons is coincidental. Printed in the U. S. A. by the Guinn Co., Inc. Title Reg. appl'd for U. S. Pat. Off.

*What's a poor princess to do when  
she's dragooned into becoming a . . .*

# Dragon Lady

By EVELYN E. SMITH

**B**ACK in the Eleventh Century, I was the only daughter of a rich and powerful king in the North, as well as being the most beautiful woman in the known world, though I say it as shouldn't. Naturally a combination of such talents as my looks and my dowry would make princes come from far and near to seek my hand in marriage.

Of course they had to be princes; anyone else would be shown the drawbridge, if not the moat, immediately. After all, I did have a position to maintain.

I was pretty choosy — nobody was good enough for me. This one was this and that one was that, and Father was getting pretty exasperated. He wanted to marry me off so that he could form an alliance with an old dame who reigned in the South—and he knew how I felt about stepmothers.

Princes came from hither and princes came from yon. I turned all of them down, and not politely, either. Then Prince Sulciman came out of the East. He was young, handsome and talented. He was a very powerful magician and, in an

Illustrated by DOCKTOR

age when printing and television had not yet been invented, a man who could do card tricks of a long winter evening was nothing to sneeze at. Besides, even a princess can turn into an old maid.

SO I cast a favorable eye on his suit. The bargain was about to be clinched when I found out that his great-grandmother on his father's side had been a goose girl. Naturally I could not form a mesalliance with anyone who had such a Rorshach on his escutcheon, even though I was crowding eighteen and well on my way to spinsterhood.

I tactfully told Suleiman we were through. "How durst thou aspire to the hand of one such as I, base-born varlet?" I demanded.

Having a bad temper, he waxed mighty wroth. "Sayest thou so, jade! Well, if thou'lt not wed me, thou'lt wed no other."

I thought he meant he was my last chance, but it seemed that he had a more dynamic idea. He turned me into a dragon. "Thou shalt live forever in this loathly form," he told me, "thy own fair semblance vanished forever, lest thou canst persuade a prince to give thee a kiss. And thou shalt dwell in the remote fastnesses of this isle and be visible to mankind only once in a decade until and if thy prince come."

I tossed my head and snorted

fire at him. "Thou mayst be noted for thy necromancy, Suleiman," I said with hauteur, "but, certes, not for thy originality. At any rate, it appears I'll outlive thee, scurvy knave, since thy curse seems to carry immortality along with it."

"I shall expend the entire resources of my magical art to make myself immortal as well," he sneered, "in order to have the pleasure of gloating over thee through the centuries." And, stepping upon his magic carpet, he was off.

Seeing that I was no longer a marriageable commodity, my father packed me off to Loch Ness and married the dame in the South. Later, I heard, she poisoned him and usurped his domains.

I LIVED in the bottom of the lake for some nine hundred years, emerging at ten-year intervals to see if there were any princes in the vicinity. But there was never anybody but a peasant or two, so I sneered at them and retired to my boudoir, where I slept between appearances. There is nothing that can ruin a girl's looks more than not getting enough sleep.

Of course, when I say there were no princes in the vicinity, I am not being strictly accurate. Suleiman was there, gloating—if you count him, that is. The first time I pretended neither to see him nor to hear his taunts, but paddled

around, humming to myself with a *déagé* air, and creating a mighty splash every time I came near his side of the lake. He was a nimble-footed youth, though, so I didn't succeed in dampening either his enthusiasm or his robes.

The second time I even deigned to speak to him, for twenty years without talking had been rather trying to a female of my temperament. And the local peasantry could not speak Dragon language, which was reserved for the nobility and gentry and, of course, dragons.

"Ho, varlet!" I said, trying to deluge him.

"Ha, hussy!" he retorted, springing aside.

The next time I appeared, he didn't show up at all. I began to think something had gone wrong with his plans for immortality, and I was glad. Only . . . he was the last remaining person of my acquaintance who could speak Dragon; in fact, he was the last remaining person of my acquaintance.

Apparently his spells were still working, however, for he did turn up a decade later. "Oh, good morrow, Suleiman," I said, throwing water at him. "Prithee, what is new?"

He leaped away, but was it my imagination or did a spot of moisture dabble the purple velvet of his robe? "Good morrow, cot-

quean," he replied. "Nothing of import. I believe some bastard from Normandy conquered the Saxons last year."

I snorted contemptuously. "Oh, those Southerners — anybody can conquer them!"

Suleiman didn't show for forty years. When he came, I was almost — not quite, mind you, but almost — glad to see him.

"I have come to gloat," he announced.

"Gloat away!" I splashed enthusiastically. He was absolutely drenched. "How now!" I exclaimed. "What hath befallen your erstwhile agility, Suleiman?"

"I've been sick," he explained.

But he didn't come again. So I was all by myself in the lake for eight hundred and fifty years. However, I always say if one has inner spiritual resources one is never really alone.

WHICH brings us up to date. One morning in 1957 came *der tag*. I smoothed down my scales, got my flame-thrower in working order and sallied forth to the surface ready to dazzle the world. By now I had virtually given up all hope of finding a prince and was interested primarily in frightening tourists. That always entertained me.

It was spring. The heather was in bloom. And there on the bank stood a prince.





To anybody else he would have been Fred Halbfranzband, Assistant Director of the New York Zoological Gardens, but I instantly recognized him as Manfred Agidius Rudiger Wolfgang Bonifaz Humfried von Halbfranzband und zu Saffian, rightful heir by lineal descent to the throne of Schwundia, which, even though that country had been absorbed into Luxembourg in 1867, still made him a prince in my book.

He was old, he was fat, he was nearsighted. I didn't care. All I wanted was for him to take me in his arms and kiss me—tenderly, passionately, paternally. I didn't care which type of osculation he used as long as the kiss itself was a *fait accompli*.

"Darling!" I trumpeted, leaping gracefully out of the lake.

Water inundated him. In my girlish enthusiasm, I'd forgotten how much tonnage I drew. But he didn't mind. "Aha," he exclaimed, his pale blue eyes gleaming behind his spectacles, "just as I thought! The so-called Loch Ness Monster is nothing but a surviving specimen of *Diplodocus Britannicus*."

I drew myself up haughtily. "Diplodoca Britannica, if you please." But, to my astonishment, he couldn't understand Dragon. In my day, it had been a required course in all royal curricula—which just went to show how times had

changed for the worse!

"Watch out, sir!" one of Manfred's assistants warned. "It looks dangerous."

Me dangerous? The idea was absurd! I was tempted to eat him just for daring to suggest such a thing, but I restrained myself. After all, he belonged to Manfred . . . and so did I. Besides, I preferred herring, proving I was a dragon and not a diplodocus, because, I found out later, diplodoci are herbivorous!

"Kiss me, darling," I roared, nuzzling Manfred—which was quite a trick, as I had to keep my interior furnaces under control. A French-fried prince would be of absolutely no use to me.

"Nonsense," the prince said to his assistant, "the creature seems quite friendly. Probably the legend of its ferocity arose because tourists teased it." He extended a slightly shaky hand—apparently he hadn't quite convinced himself that I was the innocent, playful creature I appeared to be. "Come here, nice boy," he said.

Nice boy! A fine chance I had of getting him to kiss me!

But I kept my temper. I remembered that if I stuck with Manfred I could be visible all the time. And, as I was an exceptionally handsome dragon—if I do say so myself—I felt that more people should have the privilege of looking at me.

MANFRED took me down to London, where I was exhibited to vast, cheering throngs. Getting an exit visa presented no difficulty, but my entrance visa to the United States was harder. Somebody had written an anonymous letter to the State Department saying I was a subversive, and the prince had the damndest time disproving it.

The ocean voyage was—to put it mildly—ghastly. It was ghastly for Manfred too, as never before in his long zoological career had it been necessary to take care of a seasick dragon. He was a pretty nice fellow; he came every day to my modest apartment in the hold to smooth my fevered brow and whisper words of encouragement, but he wouldn't kiss me. To tell the truth, I don't think it ever occurred to him.

I'd never before had any difficulty in getting a man to kiss me—quite the reverse, in fact—but I guess it's different when you're five-foot-seven, blonde and curved in the right places, from when you're eighty-five feet long, green and who cares where your curves are?

They gave me a ticker-tape parade down Broadway and did everything to make me feel at home; hung garlands around my neck and served up magnificent nut steaks (Manfred still was under the delusion that I was herbi-

vorous) and chocolate creams. But nobody kissed me.

They put my picture in the papers (wrong profile) and wrote reams of copy about me; I appeared on television and was a smash hit. But nobody kissed me.

I was installed in the largest, handsomest, fanciest cage at the zoo (though I would have preferred a more exclusive one farther away from the refreshment stand), complete with private swimming pool. But nobody kissed me . . .

And then Manfred, my prince, left me, left me to go back to his wife—a middle-aged *hausfrau* whose bloodlines were absolutely anemic. *Bourgeois*, that's what he was. *Bourgeois*!

"Well, good-by, Dipsy," he said to me, not without regret, for he was, like all Mittel-European princes, a man of strong sentiment. "I'll drop by now and again to see how you're getting on."

I clung to him, crying so hard I almost put out my fires. My last hope was going. If he didn't kiss me, I would have to remain a dragon for the rest of my life and, since dragons are immortal unless killed by knights *sans peur et sans reproche*—a category which has been extinct for ages—that was a longish time.

"Look how fond she's grown of me," Manfred said, and there were tears behind his thick lenses.

"Sometimes I almost think she understands. Honestly, Dipsy, I do hate to leave you, but you're going to have a very superior keeper taking care of you; he just came from the reptile house at Babylon with the finest credentials."

A little old man dressed in the blue uniform of the zoo attendants shuffled creakily into my cage, his eyes on the ground. "You'll take good care of Dipsy, won't you, Sol?"

"Yessirce, Mr. Halbfanzband," Sol said in a cracked voice, "I sure will. You just leave her to me; I'll treat her right."

I snorted, but there was something . . . something . . .

**E**VEN after Manfred had left my cage, I still had the peculiar sensation that came to me whenever a prince was in the immediate vicinity.

I looked at Sol. Sol looked at me. There was something terribly familiar in those bloodshot gray eyes. "Prince Suleiman!" I exclaimed. "*C'est toi!*"

"See, I told you," he cackled. "Made myself immortal so I could stay and gloat over you."

"You've certainly come down in the world," I observed. "Whatever happened to your Oriental riches?"

"Spent a lot on those two spells; they were both expensive ones," he explained. "Finally had to trade

in my carpet. And then prices went up so during the last nine centuries I couldn't afford other transportation to go to Scotland for the gloating season."

"How did you get here?" I asked.

"Oh, I've been working at various zoos off and on for over a hundred years, ever since I lost my last shred of magic power. Knew you'd turn up at one some day so's I could resume gloating."

"By the way," I said, "I may have been misinformed, but I had understood that Babylon was *kaputt*."

"That's Babylon, Babylonia," he told me. "I worked for the zoo in Babylon, Suffolk County, Long Island."

I looked him over critically. "You haven't kept yourself in very good condition. You look more like a thousand than only nine hundred and fifty-two years."

"Forgot to sign up for perpetual youth along with immortality. Ah, if only, when I was a student, I had paid more attention to the classics and less to Hermes Trismegistus," he sighed, "this would never have happened."

I had a smashing idea. "Listen, Suleiman," I bumbled, "you'll always be a prince, come what may. And in 1957 I can afford to be broad-minded; after all, what is a goose girl in the family tree compared to what current royalty

is allying itself with? Why don't you kiss me?"

"I? Kiss you?" He chewed his ragged white mustache thoughtfully. "That's right—I could break the spell, couldn't I?"

"Sure," I replied excitedly. "And if you kiss me I'll turn back into a princess again. And I'll marry you. Nine hundred and thirty years ago, you vowed eternal devotion. Don't tell me that the mere passage of time has made you fickle?"

He smiled, showing long yellow teeth. "Oh, I'm still true to you, Dipsy. And, to prove that I love you for yourself and not for your beauty, I'm going to leave you in your present form so I can demonstrate my faithfulness."

"You mean you *won't* kiss me?" I breathed fire.

"That's right. When you were eighteen and I was twenty-two, we were just right for each other. But, if I kiss you, you'll become an eighteen-year-old princess again, while I'll still be a nine hundred and fifty-two-year-old zoo attendant. You wouldn't stay with me, for I'll have neither spells nor money to hold you. Anyway, at my age I'm too old for the pleasures of the flesh. I can enjoy a beautiful spiritual communion with you in your dragon shape."

"I could eat you," I threatened. "Let's see what chance immortality has against the gastric juices."

"Sure you could. But remember you'd be eating the only person remaining in the world who can understand Dragon. Immortality is a long and lonely thing, Dipsy."

SO it looked as if I were stuck. I tried to rationalize the situation. After all, I told myself, the zoo was better than the bottom of the lake. Certainly I had much more chance of running into a prince there. Moreover, I led an active social life—people thronged like mad from all over to see me, quite like in the old days at dear Papa's court—and Suleiman read me all the latest books and periodicals so that I was *au courant*.

He also managed to convince Manfred that I wasn't entirely herbivorous, and so occasionally I did get to have a nice kipper with my tea. And sometimes, when he was in a good mood, Suleiman would get me a box of popcorn from the refreshment and souvenir stand—I do so love popcorn. For a very special treat he would get me the raw kernels, and I would pop them myself inside my own personal furnace.

But, although physically comfortable, I was not happy. What annoyed me most were Saturdays. Saturday was Suleiman's day off, when I would be put in the charge of an absolute clod who not only couldn't speak Dragon, but had

difficulties with all other languages. And Suleiman always rolled in early Sunday morning looking so happy! Not as if he'd missed me at all!

Of course he had spent some nine odd centuries without me, but I'd been under the impression that he'd spent them thinking of me. I began to suspect not only that he didn't love me any more but, what was worse, that he didn't even hate me very much.

Finally curiosity overcame pride. "Where do you go on Saturdays, Suleiman?" I asked with an idle yawn.

He shrugged. "Oh, just to a little club where we fellows get together on our days off and play a little poker or Russian roulette . . ."

"We fellows," I repeated. I would have raised an eyebrow if I'd had any. "Surely you don't mean you hobnob with the other zoo attendants in your leisure time?"

Suleiman had eyebrows and he used them. "Certainly not. We weren't drawn together by a common occupation but by uncommon bloodlines. All of us are princes."

"Princes!" I repeated. I couldn't help it—I drooled . . . great, unladylike gouts of flame.

"Why, Manhattan Island is filthy with deposed royalty," he taunted me. "Just in our club alone there's Ignace, he's doorman at the Waldorf, and Rodolphe,

headwaiter at the Stork, and Vsevolod has the knife-checking concession at a Forty-second Street penny arcade—"

"Say, why don't you bring some of them around to see me, Suleiman?" I interrupted. "Sort of a treat for them . . . and, of course," I added graciously, "for me, too." Princes . . . one of them must understand Dragon.

He grinned evilly. "Why not? I'm sure they'd like to meet you. After all, you are by way of being a celebrity."

SO the next Saturday he brought a whole gaggle of princes over, emanating royalty so hard I nearly burned myself up in my excitement. "Kiss me," I kept trumpeting. "The third bar in the cage is loose; I'm too big to get out but you can get in. Come on, kiss me—you don't know what you're missing."

But they didn't understand. Like Manfred, they were illiterate. The modern prince is educated for coping with revolving doors rather than dragons. And Suleiman had known. He wanted me to be miserable.

"She has such sympathetic eyes," Vsevolod sighed. "Somehow I feel she must have suffered." And he sighed, being a Russian prince, and whispered dramatically, "I, too, have suffered."

Oh, he was so understanding

and he had such sympathetic eyes himself—besides being the youngest and handsomest and best-blooded of the lot. If only he had just been able to understand a little more.

"Which side of Forty-second Street did you say Vsevolod's penny arcade was on?" I asked Sulciman after they'd left.

He laughed nastily. "The south. But you'll never see it, Dipsy. Even if you could get out of your cage, how would you persuade Vsevolod to kiss you? He wouldn't think your eyes were so sympathetic if he got really close."

*Oh, is that so?* I thought. That determined me. Before, I had just been hoping to get back my original shape; now I was going to do something about it. Somehow, some way I was going to get kissed. And by a prince—a genuine, authentic prince—or, wait a minute, the spell hadn't specified authenticity. All it had said was that a prince had to give me a kiss. And spells usually tended to be literal in their application . . .

It was a couple of days after I had met Vsevolod that I heard a loud commotion at the gates to the zoo. A small yipping dog flashed beneath the outstretched arms of the guards and bounded down the path, followed at a short distance by a small yipping child. This sort of thing happened from time to time at the zoo and normally I kept

myself aloof from such vulgar disturbances. But this time it was different, for the child was shrieking, "Here, Prince! Nice Princey! Come here!"

My ears rose and so did Suleiman's. "Come here, Prince," I cooed thunderously. "Nice doggie."

The mutt swerved toward my cage. Most dogs instinctively understand Dragon.

"Oh, no you don't!" Suleiman snarled, grabbing the animal as it tried to slip between the bars.

"Please, Suleiman," I begged. "He reminds me of my swift-footed greyhound, Alisoun, back in the days when I was a happy princess."

"I'm not going to have the creature slobber all over you and turn you back into a happy princess again," he told me nastily. "Here—" he handed the dog to the child—"and don't let it get inside the zoo again. There's some mighty ferocious beasts around here as would gollup him in one mouthful."

"Oooo, thank you, sir," the child said, bestowing a sickening look of gratitude on Suleiman. "Bad Princey! Nasty old dinosaur might've swallowed you up."

I wasn't as upset by this *bouleversement* as I let on, because I'd actually achieved my purpose and found out what I wanted to know. The spell worked literally or Suleiman wouldn't have been so apprec-

hensive. But I carried on furiously, howling and trumpeting and crying until I was sure Suleiman would be convinced that I felt my last hope was gone.

**A**FTER a few hours of my loud agonies, Manfred himself appeared. "What have you been doing to Dipsy, Sol?" he demanded. "Complaints have been pouring in from visitors. They say you're beating her."

I gave a heart-rending moan.

"Oh, no, Mr. Halbfranzband," Suleiman denied. "It wasn't like that at all. This here little dog runs into her cage, see, and Dipsy makes for it—like as if to gollup it, see? And—"

"Nonsense," Manfred interrupted coldly. "Diplodoci are herbivorous, as you might have read for yourself in my book *Dinosaurs I Have Known*. One more disturbance like this, Sol, and we'll have to get Dipsy another keeper. In my position I simply cannot afford to antagonize the ASPCA." He turned and walked away.

"How about that, Dipsy?" Suleiman asked. "You wouldn't like that, would you? Another keeper probably wouldn't understand Dragon."

"Yeah, but it would be worse for you," I returned. "I'm your whole *raison d'être*. How'd you like not being able to taunt me except from outside my cage, like

an ordinary visitor? And I'll bet if I screamed hard enough you'd be barred from the zoo. I throw a little weight around here myself, you know."

"Look, Dipsy," he promised desperately, "I'll do anything you like, except put you in the way of getting kissed. After all, you couldn't expect me to do that."

"All right," I conceded, with an amiability that would have aroused the suspicions of a more intelligent man. "Read to me from the paper."

So he read to me. Visitors gathered around to watch the pretty sight. There was one small child munching on an interesting and colorful assortment of sweets in a cellophane bag which obscured none of their beauties. I was fascinated, but I tore my eyes away.

"News, news, news!" I suddenly interrupted Suleiman's reading. "Who wants your old news? What do I care what happens to all those peasants? Find me a paper with something interesting in it. Read to me of romance, adventure, excitement among the upper classes."

"But—"

"What do I care for your squalid little wars, your sordid little senators? What are the dukes and kings doing, I want to know? Who won the third at Epsom?"

"Look here, Dipsy—" He was getting angry; I'd counted on that

terribly bad temper of his.

"I bet you're making up everything you read," I persisted. "It's too stupid to have been put down in black and white. Only a moron like you could possibly imagine such things."

He crumpled up the paper and flung it straight in my face. "All right, then, read it yourself!"

"Shame!" cried the crowd.

**I**T wasn't the indignity that bothered me. I eagerly looked down at myself, but I was still green, still eighty-five feet long, still a dragon. What had gone wrong? I had been smacked in the face by the public prints! I should have turned into a princess.

Suddenly Suleiman caught on. He began to laugh. "Won't work, Dipsy," he cackled. "*Prints* might've passed, but *smack* is a colloquial term, and a literal spell doesn't comprehend colloquialisms."

I burst into hot, angry tears, accompanied with vociferous ululation. Several people detached themselves from the crowd and started walking purposefully toward the Administration Building, obviously to inform Manfred that Suleiman wasn't doing right by me.

"Oh, for God's sake, Dipsy, *look happy!*" Suleiman urged. "Why must you cut off your nose to spite your face?"

"I look unhappy because I *am*

unhappy!" I howled. "And what's more I shall rage and scream and trumpet and stamp all my feet!"

"Isn't there anything . . . how about a nice bag of popcorn?"

I affected to consider his proposition. "Candy," I said. "I'll be quiet for candy."

He breathed a sigh of relief. "All right, I'll get you some from the refreshment stand."

"No, the refreshment stand always has the same old candy bars. I want a salmagundi like that one." I pointed toward the child with the cellophane bag.

"Oh, all right. I'll see if I can get it for you."

There was no difficulty, for the child proved more than willing to part with its candy for the munificent sum of fifty cents. I calmed down as Suleiman began to feed me the sweets. "Isn't that cute?" the child's mother cooed.

Suleiman gave me a handful of jelly beans and chocolate lentils and then a handful of gum drops and hard candies.

I could see Manfred approaching in the distance, breathing fire almost as well as I could. "Now do try to look happy, Dipsy," Suleiman urged, glancing nervously over his shoulder as he unwrapped the silver foil from a small piece of chocolate.

Smiling broadly, I opened my mouth. Suleiman popped the candy kiss inside.



I closed my mouth. There was a strange shrinking sensation all over me. I had won. After nine hundred and thirty years I was a princess again.

The crowd stared, open-mouthed.

"All done with mirrors, folks," I told them cheerfully as I pushed aside the third bar and stepped out.

"Really, Sol," Manfred said indignantly as he met me leaving, "you should know better than to entertain friends in the animal cages. I think you had better turn in your . . . *Where is Dipsy? What have you done with her?*"

I smiled ravishly at the refreshment-stand attendant. He just

stared at me. "You'll let me have this to remember you by, won't you?" I asked, picking up a street guide to Manhattan. "Let me see—Forty-second Street is due south of here, isn't it?"

He nodded dumbly.

I started walking in that direction.

After all, bloodlines may not be particularly important when it's a question of breaking a spell, but when it comes to forming a permanent alliance they cannot be overlooked.

*Evelyn E. Smith*

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# STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS

By ROY HUTCHINS



*He lived in a bed, but he never slept . . .  
and he was getting too big for his bridges!*

**H**E was pretty wild as a youngster, about the time the earliest settlers worked their flatboats up the Connecticut River and lugged their belongings westward into the hills of the New Hampshire Grants. The Indians called him Pawpanoosic, which one trapper claimed was a cussword—and by Ethan Allen's day, he had been cussed by redman and white alike.

Illustrated by **DICK FRANCIS**



The village split in thirds over naming him. When Vermont became an independent nation, he was in a growing spell and particularly rambunctious, so one third insisted upon calling him Wild River.

A second faction favored calling him Enoch Stream, after old Enoch Tilley, who was the first white man to settle in this green valley. Naturally enough, they were all Tilleys and every buttonhole relation they could claim.

The first and third factions stood firm against the Tilleys, pointing out that the village was Enoch Falls and the mountain was Enoch Knob and that quite enough.

The third group wanted to keep the Indian name, but nobody else agreed with that, either.

A Scotsman returning from Indian country settled it. He came across from the west bank, striding easily on the felled pine that served as the upper bridge, and met a group of the village men. Asking what stream this was, he received three different answers and the full story, whereupon he grinned.

"Ye canna have the right name, then," he said, "else the wee river wouldna be so wild."

Deliberately, he turned his back to the village men and faced the narrow current.

"Do ye like the name of Wild River?" he asked.

**F**OR a few moments, there was only the whisper of moving water. Then a small, random current seemed to build up around a boulder near shore and it growled and foamed about the rock.

The Scot shrugged. "How about Enoch Stream?"

Again a growl of water. It was repeated more fiercely when Pawpanoosic was mentioned.

"He'll have none of 'em," said the Scot matter-of-factly. He glanced back at the river when there was no response from the men. "A fine, braw stream he is, too."

The waters purred about the boulder.

"Braw?" repeated the Scot.

Tiny wavelets flung ecstatically into the air and a cheery burble developed.

"There's your name," said the traveler to the village men. "Call him Braw River."

That was in 1779 and, for two whole years, Braw River was better behaved than Enoch Falls dared to believe. Then they awoke one morning in the summer of 1781 to a clamor of trouble.

They gathered quickly and watched Braw raging over his banks in a flash flood. There had been no storm and little rain this year, but already he had taken out the wagon bridge that led to the cornfields across the bend, and probably the new upper bridge was gone as well.

"*Dad-goned river!*" cried Nate Tilley, stamping furiously. "He'll be up in my corn next!"

"Yourn ain't the only corn there," said John Spooner quietly.

One of the men at the edge of the group shouted and pointed downstream. Men and women squinted into the early daylight. Far down, near the second bend, they saw an arm appear abruptly from the churning waters, which quickly pulled it under again.

"Braw's got somebody!" a woman exclaimed.

"More'n one. I see heads," said the first man.

"Danged river's turned killer!" yelled Nate Tilley.

"No," said Spooner into the shocked silence. "Look across by the sugar bush—three Injuns, cuttin' for the woods."

"A raidin' party!" cried Patience Howe. "If the river hadn't caught 'em on the bridge, we'd all been killed in our beds!"

Soberly, the group began breaking up. The womenfolk hurried on ahead because their men hadn't been fed yet.

Nate Tilley eyed John Spooner. "Guess we got to build ourselves a bridge."

"There's some good, straight spruce in my back lot," said Spooner.

"S'pose I could drag a few," put in another. "My oxen need workin'. Gettin' fat."

Elry Sutton hitched his pants. "I'll bring my axe," he said.

**B**UT mid-afternoon came and Braw River still raged and roiled. He'd had been in Nate Tilley's cornpatch and washed out one of the stone piers that supported the center of the bridge. He had risen on the village side of the bend clear to the corner of Howe's cabin.

The menfolk prudently stopped on high ground with the logs and hewn planks for the new bridge. Some of the women were already there, watching the swollen stream.

"*Dad-goned river!*" complained Tilley. "Never know what he's a-goin' to do next. Why don't he go down?"

"Don't make sense," agreed Sutton. "He got them Injuns first crack. No need to keep floodin'."

Barbara Moffat wheeled on the menfolk so quickly her homespun skirt flared. "Trust you men not to think of manners! How'd you feel, savin' somebody's life with nary a word of thanks?"

"Thank a *river*?" asked her husband blankly.

"You were there, Sam Moffat, when that Scot named him. You swore he talked to the river and the river answered. I say if Braw had feelings enough to save our lives, he has enough to want proper thanks."

Moffat looked at Sutton and

Sutton looked at Spooner. The twenty-odd men were silent while Barbara Moffat put her hands on her hips and glared at them. One of the harnessed oxen leaned impatiently into his yoke and the load creaked.

"Well?" Barbara demanded.

John Spooner spoke without looking at anyone in particular. "We might walk down to the river, Nate, 'fore he takes it in mind to wash some homes out."

"Guess we might," said Tilley, and led the way reluctantly.

The men in their loose, sweat-stained shirts lined up uneomfortably along the bank and disposed of their fidgety hands either behind their backs or deep in their poekets. The womenfolk bunched behind, execept Barbara Moffat, whose head was poked around her husband's shoulder.

**B**RAW RIVER roiled and fussed under a boulder before the delegation. Nate Tilley cleared his throat and, at that moment, the boulder went down the bank with a mighty splash. The delegation jumped back hurriedly and a deep chuckling sound came from the spot where water engulfed the rock.

"Better say it fast, Nate," advised John Spooner.

"Me?" demanded Tilley. "Say what? Whole danged business is foolishness, anyway."

The river's sound changed to an ominous rumble and small waves climbed higher toward the group.

"You men'll ruin us yet!" cried Barbara Moffat. She shoved her husband off balance into Elry Sutton and stepped through the line of men.

"River!" she called, and flung her arms high like a priestess in homespun. "We know you saved us from the raiding party this morning and we're proper grateful, even if some amongst us ain't got much sense. If they had, you'd been thanked sooner, but I guess late is better'n not at all and next time we'll try to be quieker. Now, if you'll aaccept our gratefulness, we'd kind of like to get the bridge put baek."

Barbara dropped her arms and the group was silent behind her, with only a testy *hem* from Nate Tilley. The river fretted and swatted irritably at a small spruce. A grumble came from upstream and a snort from the shallows, but they saw that the wavelets were not tossing so high and soon a foot and more of damp bank was exposed.

They shouted then and Sam Moffat grabbed his wife and danced her in a circle.

"Barb'ry done it!" he chanted until she shook loose and wagged a finger under his nose.

"Keep this day in mind, you and your men friends. Any time

that river ain't treated right by Enoch Falls, just watch out!"

**T**HEY learned to watch out and they learned to live with a young, growing river. If it took patience and stubbornness almost beyond human measure — well, those are the qualities that make Vermonters.

Not all of them, of course. There are those who just aren't equipped to cope with a growing child, let alone a young boy river. Hollering and shouting does no good. It just seems to put more zip into the young ones' next antics. That's the way it was with Nate Tilley's grandson and Braw River.

Right after young Matt Tilley took over the farm from his father, Braw got into the corn. The Spooner kids were playing with some Moffats and they saw what happened. Braw was tossing a couple of small logs around, flipping them over boulders and making them spin, when they escaped his grasp and landed up on the west bank. First thing anybody knew, the logs had rolled sidewise clear through Matt's cornpatch and back.

Things were mighty quiet for a couple of hours, with the river sort of tiptoeing past the village, until Matt happened to glance across at his cornfield. He let out a bellow that flattened the leaves on the trees, then strode down to Braw River, and the language he

used was something terrible. Braw scrooched down in his bed, making himself as small as a hillside creek, and Sue Ann Moffat ran out in her dooryard to hold her hands over her daughter's ears.

Folks told Matt he had made a mistake, but he was too much a Tilley to apologize. Braw waited till Matt had tried to put his corn to rights, then slipped in one night and finished it. He didn't neglect the hayfields, either.

Matt figured the big thing in his favor was the location of his house; Braw could never rise high enough to reach that. It got so that, every morning, folks could hear him down by the river, jeering and cussing and daring any blamed river to run *him* out of town. They figured Braw would have let up on Matt if it hadn't been for that.

For six years, Matt hung on, until the day his well water turned to mud. Braw hadn't been able to reach the house, but he had done some things to the water-table. Matt never went down to the river again. He sold out, part of his land to a Spooner and part to a Moffat, loaded his goods on a wagon and headed his oxen west.

As his wagon rumbled across the bridge at the bend, he looked down at the grieving current — grieving because the feud was over.

"Guess I drove ye to it," he

said. "But ye won fair. I just hope ye have no relatives out where I'm going."

**M**ATT Tilley wasn't the only one to leave Enoch Falls, though his going took the last of old Enoch Tilley's direct descendants.

But others came and some stayed despite Braw's youthful mischief. The village grew to respectable size and the Spooners and Moffats took over as its first families. After a century or so, Braw was no longer a small-boy river with a child's black-and-white conviction that the world centers about him.

No, Braw grew into adolescence—and that was worse.

In place of his deviltry, he had moods. Instead of pranks, he had outsize ideas. As awareness of the world developed, curiosity kept pace with it until he became the snoopi-est river in Vermont. Where, a few years before, any romantic young couple venturing out on Braw River in a canoe was asking for a dunking, Braw now took the greatest care that no stray drop of water should disturb them—and eavesdropped shamelessly.

For a time, he had the habit of pushing a small rivulet up under the windows of the houses near his bank every night and listening. But one night Alf Sutton left a selectmen's meeting, where the cider

had flowed hard and free, and decided foggily to take a short-cut home. He found the path between Howe's house and the riverbank and moved along briskly, if unsteadily, under an icy sliver of October moon. He was in good voice when something caught at his feet and he went tail over eyebrows into what was undeniably water.

Alf hadn't contacted water for a good two months and this water wasn't merely wet and unexpected, it was cold and wet and unexpected.

He yelled.

Braw River hadn't heard Alf coming. He had been too intent on a conversation in the Stewart living room. Now, to avoid being caught, he yanked back his branch with a rush. This resulted in pouring several hundred gallons of water over the foundering Alf, who howled in sheer horror.

The Stewarts and the Howes, rushing outdoors, found Alf Sutton flopping, gasping and cleaner than he had been for years, on dry land thirty yards from the river.

When they had him indoors by the fire and had heard his tale of a monstrous tidal wave, however, they began to wonder. A quick investigation by lantern-light showed the strip of wet ground from the river up to their windows and Braw was fair found out.



WHEN the delegation came to him the next morning, he tried to explain that a river had to get an education somehow. They failed to understand his rumblings and purlings. Instead of listening, they stood like a row of icicles while the spokesman—one of the Moffats—delivered an ultimatum.

"Folks has got a right to privacy in their own homes," said he righteously. "We don't mean to put up with any such snoopin' round our windows as you been doin', Braw River, an' we're servin' notice right here an' now."

"That little Claire Stream t'other side o' the hill, it don't cause no trouble. Nobody ever says a word to it, neither. But you—here you got all the rights an' advantages of a citizen an' how do you act? Turrible, that's how."

"Wal, Braw, we ain't minded to stand for it. If'n you won't pull your share o' the load, we'll just leave you out'n the yoke. We won't talk over the village plans with you, nor nothin' else. An' if'n you kick up too much ruckus, why, by Godfrey, we ain't chained to our land an' we could pick up an' move."

A freezing current swept down Braw's middle. He could faintly recall a time when there hadn't been a village here, but he had been hardly more than a baby then. The thought that they might

leave him now was shocking. All these people—the Spooners, whom he liked, the Moffats, whom he didn't, and the scores of others—if they left, he would have no one to talk to him, no one to look up to him. He would be *alone*.

Hastily, Braw found a boulder and made the gurgling sound that they understood as assent. It was a drawn-out, worried gurgling.

"All right," said Moffat. "Mind, now, that's a promise an' don't you go breakin' it."

Break it—and have them leave? Braw sniffled piteously through a stony shallow. They just didn't understand him.

## II

THINGS smoothed down for quite a spell. Braw couldn't forget the villagers' threat, but he simply had to continue his education. If he couldn't listen openly to people in their homes, how could it be managed? Could he come up from underneath? Then he remembered the water-table. Some of the newer homes in the village had their wells in the cellar, so it was a simple matter, after all. Braw received a combined Atwood-Stewart-Hayes-Sutton idea of what the world was about—and a peculiar idea it was at times—but it was education of a sort.

And nobody knew he was get-

ting it, so the village was content.

In 1898, they built a handsome covered bridge across him at the bend, to replace the old wagon bridge. The Lieutenant Governor himself came all the way down from Montpelier for the dedication. Braw was so excited and proud, he burst his banks in three places. Nobody would have minded except that one of the places was right where the official group stood and, in his eagerness to get closer to the festivities, Braw soaked the Lieutenant Governor clear to the knees.

After the dampened dignitary had been apologized to, dried, fed and sent on his way, a delegation came down to speak to Braw. Old Moffat cried in his squeaky voice that Braw had disgraced them by an act no decent Republican river would dream of. In all his life, he stormed, he'd never been so horrified as when he turned to see water slappin' at the official shanks.

But, right there, the recollection of an oversized brook rushing upon the unsuspecting Lieutenant Governor, as if to shake his hand, became more than Tess Stewart could hold. She let slip a giggle. In no time at all, the delegation had broken down and some of them were rolling on the grassy bank in undignified laughter. Braw was chuckling by now, too, his fear of a dressing down vanished. The

best Moffat could manage was an admonition to mind what he was doing next time.

Enoch Falls didn't grow much more—there's a natural limit to the number of families a small river valley can support—but it began to come up to date with the rest of the world. There were seven stores in the village, including the grain yard, and Ab Moffat was doing pretty well with his new sawmill.

When Ham Spooner spent \$900 for a new Ford automobile, though, folks figured he had gone clear out of his mind. First time he drove his family to church in it, he had to pay for five buggy shafts that were kicked off by the horses it scared, and Braw thought Ham's own buggy had caught fire. He like to drowned Ham, trying to put it out, and the Spooners wouldn't speak to him for a week.

That was serious punishment, because Braw had a violent crush on Ham's wife, Bessie, at the time.

**I**T was in 1923 that Enoch Falls got tired of the alternate mud and dust that was Main Street. Town Meeting that March near split the walls of the Grange Hall, but there were 26 automobiles in the village then and their owners were not only the leading citizens, but the stubbornest, and they won their fight. Come July, a hired contractor moved his equipment in

to tar Main Street from Braw's covered bridge all the way to the small upper bridge, then north to Prather's Corner.

Braw was proud as a prizewinner at the county fair to see such progress in his village. To avoid the possibility of his curiosity overcoming his common sense, the selectmen arranged for some of the older children to act as runners, relaying news of everything that happened down to Braw. Thus, every time a fresh barrel of tar was used, word reached Braw within the minute and he was able to follow the whole operation vicariously.

At last it was completed and a delegation came to tell him how fine the village looked, with the new black pavement and the store fronts repainted. Why, you could walk from Abbott's general store clear down to Moffat's feed store without getting your shoes covered with dust in the autumn or mud in the spring.

Braw thought mistily what a wonderful sight the village must now be. Probably the biggest, finest place in Vermont. And that made him a pretty important river.

Not only was everybody happy about Main Street, but folk were impressed by the great restraint Braw had shown throughout the paving operation. It was the first major event in living memory that he hadn't lifted so much as a

tributary to interfere with. They praised him for it and he puffed up in the channel with grown-up pride.

Before the week was past, though, Braw moped and he sulked. He worried an overhanging branch and he kicked a small rock. The village didn't really care about *him*. Had they so much as shown him a picture of the new Main Street? No, they'd come bragging and making a great to-do about it, but not one of them stopped to think that *he'd* like to see it.

In minutes, Braw struggled from the mire of self-pity to the summit of righteous anger. He swelled mightily at the upper bridge and went down to see Main Street for himself.

**H**E surged the full width of it and a foot deep, and Main Street was shiny and black and smooth. The houses on either side were big and handsome behind their newly painted picket fences and, when he came to Abbott's General Store, it nearly stopped his current to see such a noble emporium. He just naturally had to go inside and look around.

Abbott's wife was alone in the store and she let out a squawk when Braw burst open the front door and flowed down the center aisle. As he explored the cracker barrel and climbed a counter to finger the cotton petticoats, she

began beating at him with a broom. Her language became downright unladylike and Braw drained himself from the store in shocked haste.

Back out on Main Street, Braw found that folks were crowding well back in the safety of Spooner's front yard. He did a few swirls of appreciation for them, threatening the picket fence momentarily, then went on to see the rest of the town.

At the feed store, Ab Moffat was engaged in some kind of dance on the loading platform and was shouting, "Don't you dast git into my feed bags!" So Braw went carefully around him and entered. He was disappointed. Inside was nothing but a jumble of large lumps, which felt to his touch rather like mud and which seemed to get squishier by the moment.

Leaving the feed store past the curiously howling Moffat, Braw continued down Main Street, enjoying the ease with which he could glide over the smooth surface. He tried entering three other stores, but the people inside were plain rude and he soon left.

At last he reached his lower bridge and slipped with a sigh back into his accustomed bed. The small boy and the two mongrel dogs who were washed down with the debris, he carefully placed back on shore. It had been an exciting day and he was too weary to play with them right now.



**S**EVEN generations of Enoch Falls had had a hand in the raising of Braw River by 1953. If he sometimes got a mite out of control, why, that happened with any youngster, though Braw's pranks were on a grander scale



than most could manage. Perhaps he made life a bit more difficult than one would expect it to be in a secluded river valley, but by and large it wasn't worse than anywhere else. Children were born, weaned, loved and cussed up to

adulthood to take their own wise or foolish parts in the timeless cycles — and still Braw struggled through his Gargantuan adolescence.

Early that year, Dave Spooner returned from the Army with some

interesting technical ideas.

And in June, Barbara Moffat came home from Vassar with Ideas.

A tall, athletic girl, Barbara had been put together by a Maker with a lavish hand and only the best materials in stock. It was her mother's delight to have her stand by the portrait of her five-times-great-grandmother. The resemblance was certainly strong. Bad as the portrait was, the itinerant painter had caught the flashing eyes and the stubborn little chin of the lady who had taught Enoch Falls how to live with its river.

"Why, you're the button-image of her!" exclaimed the Reverend Townley on one visit. "And a fine pioneer lady to take after, I'm sure."

"A sterling ancestor," said the present-day Barbara. "I understand she bathed once a year."

Her mother frantically poured tea for the silent minister while Barbara calmly went on to discuss the religious values of great music. She was seventeen at the time and the minister never gushed in her presence again.

Five years later, she drove into Enoch Falls from Poughkeepsie with a diploma in her suitcase, a smartly cut suit on her person and despair in her mind. She pulled the tired convertible up at the post office and the first person she met was Ed Sutton, bristling with a

three-day growth of whiskers.

"Well, Barb'ry Moffat! You all educated up and home to stay?"

"I guess so," said Barbara, conscious that several other neighbors had come out of the post office.

"Well, don't let none of that education spill over," advised Sutton, grinning widely. "I hear it cost your paw quite a penny."

"The money's safe. In some places, education is just about spill-proof." She left him puzzling and went in to pick up her mother's mail.

But the episode made her think. She could *feel* the cultural vacuum of Enoch Falls chilling her already. If her father still refused to let her get a job in New York—he'd been thunderously definite about that—then there would be some changes made around here. And she knew just the girl to make them.

**T**HUS it was that Barbara stood up at the next meeting of the Ladies' Society and told the startled membership it was time they faced up to their natural responsibilities and began pulling Enoch Falls out of the intellectual doldrums.

"We've been a farming community for nearly two hundred years and, up till a few years ago, it was a full-time job to wrestle a living out of this land. There just wasn't room in anybody's day for the finer things of life.

"But this is 1953," she went on. "Even the poorest farmer around here has a tractor and equipment to go with it. He isn't bone-tired and ready to drop into bed at eight o'clock, the way his father used to be. Now that he has this spare time, shouldn't he be given the chance to use it in a way that will enrich his life? Isn't it squarely up to us, the women, to bring good music and art to Enoch Falls?"

Apparently it was, for that was the way they voted after two hours. Barbara relaxed and began thinking about methods. Mrs. Whistler was setting out her best cups for the coffee when Liz Potter suddenly remembered something important.

"We'll have to tell Braw first thing tomorrow," she said. "My, won't he be tickled, though, to have some real culture coming to the village!"

"Nonsense!" said Barbara, so sharply that they all stared. "The first step in any campaign to improve Enoch Falls is to get rid of this old wives' tale that Braw River is a—a—well, a personality. Of course, our ancestors didn't have the scientific knowledge we have today, so it was easy for them to slip into superstition. Let's not start off our cultural program with anything so childish as telling a *river* what we're going to do."

Liz Potter said, "Ooh!" in a scared squeak and Barbara smile

ed reassuringly. The others looked into their coffee cups—no doubt to see that they were well washed—and Mrs. Whistler scurried out after the coffee.

That night, fourteen women came individually to tell Braw River that culture was coming at last to Enoch Falls. He was so pleased that he whirlpooled down by the bridge. He was flattered by all this attention, too, but why didn't they come together and by daylight, as they always had?

### III

DAVE Spooner sat on the riverbank below his north meadow, within sight of the upper bridge and across from the village. His long legs were drawn up under him, but he sat erect and easy, holding a new glass fishing rod in his left hand and a closed book in his right.

"That's one more reason why we can't build another Hoover Dam on you, aside from the fact that we'd have to abandon the village," he said. The tip of his rod dipped in a long arc, but Dave made no motion to set the hook. Instead, he frowned. "Doggone it, Braw, stop shoving those perch down to my bait. You'll have me so busy pulling them in that I won't have time to talk to you."

Braw made a sound of apology and hastily shoosed the small school

of yellow fish back upstream. He had been too engrossed in what Dave was telling him to realize he was making the fishing too good to believe. He always saw to it that Dave caught fish, even when nobody else could get a nibble, but eight perch in five minutes was ridiculous.

*What should I do, then?* asked Braw, purling against a boulder.

Dave pushed the perch into his bulging creel and began taking the hook off his line. He shook his head.

"That's something everybody has to decide for himself. Why do you suppose I've been reading to you about these other rivers all over the world? I'll help all I can, but when it comes to saying what you're going to be when you grow up—well, there you have to speak up with your own mind and will."

*It's hard,* Braw grumbled.

"Sure," said Dave. "But you aren't going to catch fire if you don't decide by tomorrow. Take your time. Remember that nobody in the world has ever been happy, though, unless what he did helped others as well as himself."

Braw slapped gently against the bank, considering that. He had tried to help Enoch Falls before, but he always seemed to land in trouble for his pains.

*I'll help you, Dave,* he decided.

"You've been a mighty big help to me already," said Dave. "Lord

knows I appreciate it, too, what with this dry weather we're having. Still, don't you think that's a pretty small job for a river with your size and capabilities?"

*But I'm not big enough to help all the farmers.*

"I know. If that doesn't pay out, we'll look for a different kind of job for you. But that reminds me," added Dave, turning to squint westward, where the meadows sloped up toward the old farmhouse he was repairing to live in. "You'd better drain the cornpatch before we rot out the roots."

AGAINST the afternoon sun, Dave could see the silver fingers of water that ran uphill into his shoulder-high corn, following the shallow ditches he had plowed. As he watched, the waters pulled back slowly, like tender fingers reluctantly leaving a lover's hair.

"That's fine," he told Braw. "There may be bigger rivers, but there's none so talented."

Braw smote the boulder happily with a wave. Spray leaped high and the sun shot a miniature rainbow through it.

*Tell me about the Rhine Maidens again,* he begged.

"Well, if you insist. Though why that legend fascinates you has me beat."

So Dave sat down again on the bank and told about the lovely



sirens who lived in the River Rhine, guarding a golden treasure, for a ring made of it would give the wearer mastery of the world above and below. No man could make the ring, however, unless he swore never to love again.

And Dave described Alberich, king of the Nibelungs, the ugly, misshapen underworld dwarfs. Braw shivered clear down his current when Alberich came upon the beautiful maidens and lusted for them. Unable to catch any of them, the hideous dwarf saw the gold. He swore a great oath, renouncing love forever, tore the gold from the rock and fled. The maidens angrily pursued him, but he escaped with their treasure.

Braw let a long sigh purl against the boulder. He knew it was only the introduction to a story called an opera, but ever since Dave had first mentioned it, he had thought how wonderful it would be to have Braw Maidens.

"Looks like we have company," Dave said.

A car had stopped near the upper bridge and Braw recognized the man walking from it as one of the Stewarts—which one, he didn't know, since he never bothered to keep up with that family.

"Hello, Sam," said Dave.

"Mmmm," said Sam. "See you been communin' with nature again."

Sam was a middle-sized man

with a long neck, deep wrinkles in his face and large, pointed ears, from the lobes of which grew a small crop of hair.

"Something on your mind?" Dave asked.

SAM chewed his tobacco thoughtfully. "Mmm—wondered if maybe Braw changed his mind 'bout helpin' us farmers. You get all the irrigation you need—rest of us are near dried out. March, warn't it, when we got the last rain?"

"Sam, you've stood right here and heard me plead with him six or seven times. He still says he hasn't the strength to do it for all of us, even by turns."

"Ask 'im again," Sam requested, shifting his chew.

Dave shrugged and turned to Braw. "Braw, you heard Sam asking about irrigation. Can't you help him and the others out—say, one or two at a time? Their crops are almost ruined and there's none of us here in the valley with money enough to afford irrigation equipment."

Braw growled against the boulder. *Is the man an idiot? It takes strength and concentration to run water eighty feet above my level and hold it in place without letting it flood over and wash out the plants or drown them. I have strength enough to do five or six farms at once, but how could I con-*

*concentrate on them? And I know these farmers — first mistake I made, they'd all be down here yelling at me.*

Dave translated as much of this as he thought Sam should hear. "There it is," he concluded. "I'm sorry, but you heard what he said."

Sam shifted his chew again. "Mmmm, dunno. I heard what you said he said." He spat into the water.

Instantly, the water puckered and the tobacco juice came whistling back at Sam's face. Sam ducked instinctively. A rock as big as a bucket whooshed over him and a huge wave reared menacingly above the bank.

"Braw!" yelled Dave.

The wall of water hesitated. "I'll handle this," said Dave firmly. "Sam, there'll be an apology from you. I've played in and beside Braw since I was a bare-tailed tyke and I learned his language as early as I learned yours. Now you or anybody else can talk to him, but I'm the first person in Enoch Falls to understand him. Can you picture how he feels about that?"

Sam, on his knees, stared up at Dave with his eyes round and his jaw slack. He glanced apprehensively at the monstrous wave just beyond the bank, then nodded vigorously.

"Good. Maybe you can puzzle out what you shouldn't have said. And for my side of it—I don't

know whether you'll understand this or not. When one man has a certain ability that can affect a lot of people for better or worse, it's up to him to be honest and fair to everybody and not use that ability just for himself. Now I've said enough. Suppose you start."

"Guess mebbe I was hasty," Sam admitted, with his eyes on the river. "A man gets upset when his crops are dyin'. I apologize here an' now."

"Fair enough," said Dave.

Braw agreed and the wall of water fell back forgivingly.

**B**ARBARA Moffat ran into Dave Spooner at 2:30 on the following Wednesday afternoon. She hadn't seen him or given him more than a passing thought since he had gone into the Army. She wasn't thinking about him when she dashed lightly up the steps of Abbott's store—and ran into him.

The crash stopped all business transactions inside and folks stood there in a state of shock until the echoes died away. Dave was knee-deep in fallen groceries and the shards of his new bathroom mirror and Barbara was too startled to do more than stare up at him until she realized her jaw was hanging ungracefully.

Young ladies from Vassar simply don't *stare*, but Barbara was seeing someone she should know and didn't. The Army had filled

Dave out from a boy's to a man's proportions, yet that was only a physical detail. She'd stolen apples with a ten-year-old Dave Spooner, ignored him loftily at twelve, giggled at his awkwardness at fourteen and slapped him for stealing a kiss at seventeen.

Now she faced the man she had shared childhood and adolescence with and he was very nearly a stranger—a wide-shouldered, angular-featured stranger whose Vermont-marble chin was higher than her head, making her feel small and scared.

But then she saw the humor hiding in his lips and eyes and it was as if the Great Stone Face, over in New Hampshire, had suddenly looked down at her and smiled.

"You never were much of a one to look where you were going," said Dave.

Barbara was going to retort that he was usually in the way, but his look stopped her.

"You've changed," said Dave, in tones of a spoken whistle.

"I'm a little taller, that's all," she said faintly.

"You're taller," Dave agreed readily, "but that isn't all. 'Course, you're wearing enough paint to hold a barn together, but even with three coats over the primer, you look better than I used to imagine you, back in Korea."

Barbara gulped a breath to tell

him where he could aim his shotgun compliments, but with utter horror she felt her face broiling under a blush.

"I—let me help you pick up these groceries," she offered.

So she and Dave began gathering up his scattered purchases. Somewhere into the contents of the second paper bag, Dave said tentatively, "We should get together long enough to skin a rabbit, at least."

"Maybe a small one."

"Movies? Tonight?"

"Tonight." Strange that she should be winded from picking up a few things, but she was sure Dave hadn't noticed.

He straightened up, balancing the torn paper bags with great care. "Guess I'll make it to the car," he said and grinned down at her. "Stay here and catch your breath. You're out of condition, old lady."

She hated him all the way down the steps.

#### IV

FROM the moment Dave called for her, the evening was odd. He put his pickup in gear and made a U-turn to head north on Main Street. She sat primly straight in the truck cab and remembered to breathe deeply for poise—and forgot every single conversational gambit Vassar had ever devised.

"How'd you like school?" asked Dave, unbothered by protocol, after he'd coaxed the five functioning cylinders to a buzz that sounded almost like six.

"It was wonderful!" said Barbara.

*The sophisticated person is cool, not given to sudden outbursts of any kind.*

"Oh, not the hoity-toity part," she added elegantly. "The important things. The music and the art that have endured for centuries. The philosophies — men attempting to explain the universe and all the explanations different. But I think I liked the sciences best. The scientist is always looking ahead, you know, even though that's the one direction in which he can't see. And his knowledge is constantly tantalizing him with glimpses of what *might* be there."

Barbara stopped, feeling awkward. "Oh, gosh, I'm lecturing."

"Lecture away," said Dave cheerfully, swinging the pickup up the short North Road hill which led to Paisley.

Down to her right, Barbara could see the whole upper end of the valley, quiet in June twilight. Braw River twisted and gleamed and seemed to pulse like a slow-beating artery through the life of the valley, while across the bottomland, a few lights shone like mica specks along River Road, with a sprinkling at Prather's Corner.

This was home, she thought contentedly, and New York was a long way off.

Dave's pickup nosed over the hill, regaining its shaken confidence and its purr as they began the short dip toward Claire Stream. This was a tiny scratch of a valley compared to theirs and Claire Stream a dainty froth beside the hurly-burly Braw. Only a geological accident typical of Vermont's hills had kept them apart, lifting the low ridge that threw Claire Stream westward around Enoch Knob, while Braw River surged south through Enoch Falls and swung toward the east.

Dave eased the truck off the plank floor of the bridge and into the right turn that would take them to the latest and most magnificent 3-D extravaganza yet produced. A glance at Dave's rugged but relaxed features told Barbara there was no real need to talk. He seemed to be getting a quiet satisfaction in taking the pickup over a stretch of rough macadam and she became fascinated watching his precise control of the wheel.

SHE realized suddenly how smoothly the truck was riding and knew that he had taken the rough road and their speed as a challenge. She remembered, with a feeling of guilt, daring him to steal old Bull Grimsley's apples, despite the rumor that the old

man kept rock salt in his shotgun. The rumor had proved painfully true. And the time she tried to stop him when someone said he dassn't walk the spring ice on Braw River. Somehow, miraculously, the current had swept him beneath the rotten ice from where he broke through to open, shallow water.

No, Dave hadn't changed as much as she had thought that afternoon.

The first portion of the ride home, after the movie, was spent in a satisfactory discussion of the stars, color, sound and action. Not having been moviegoers in Theda Bara's day, they decided the plot was novel enough and switched to other subjects.

"What are you going to do, Dave?" asked Barbara.

"Do?"

"For a career."

Dave gave her a quizzical glance. "I'm doing it."

"Oh. I thought you were just home for a visit, to get rested after Korea. When we were kids, you always wanted to be an engineer."

He swung the pickup around a hole in the road and shook his head. "I tried it, first month at the University, but I switched to the agricultural school after that. Guess what I really liked was tinkering. An engineer doesn't get to do much of that."

"Why, I met a fellow from Springfield—"

"Who does nothing but? Once in a while, somebody falls into a job like that. Mostly, though, it's sitting at a desk, running a slide rule. Guess I'm a hayseed, like all the Spooners. It seems more natural for me to be growing things than fooling with the square root of minus one."

Trying to picture Dave hunched at a desk, Barbara realized he was right. Those big-knuckled hands weren't created to hold a pencil, but to work with living things. Years ago, she had seen them stroke and calm a sick, frightened colt with whom Dave's father and the vet had struggled without success. She had seen day-old chicks, tiny bundles of down, escape frantically from her own grasp to snuggle contentedly, moments later, in Dave's palm.

**O**DDLY, she couldn't remember his touch. Oh, as a child he'd shoved her and poked her and pulled her hair, but there had been no meaning then. She recalled with sudden clarity the time he had tried to kiss her and she was certain he had put his hands behind his back first, which was why the deed had surprised her so.

This afternoon at the store, his fingers hadn't so much as brushed hers. Of course, there was no reason why they should, but was there a reason why they shouldn't?

In the glow from the dashlight,

she watched his hands on the steering wheel and a feeling washed through her that left her weakly embarrassed and half-defiant. She was numb and silent while Dave, unnoticing, told of his grandfather deeding him the old Tilley place when the family heard he was being discharged last spring.

Dave chuckled softly. "He said I was the only one who could keep Braw out of those bottom fields, so I should have it. 'Course, he didn't mention that he won't have to pay taxes on it any more." He sobered, then, frowning. "I've meant to ask you—what's this nonsense you're spreading about Braw being an ordinary nobody of a river? It's all over town."

Abruptly, she straightened up and pushed feeling and mood away.

"Dave! You, of all people in Enoch Falls, have an education and a grounding in modern science. Surely you realize how ridiculous this legend is. How can anyone attribute intelligence to Braw River in the light of present-day knowledge?"

"For the love of gosh!" Dave exploded. "What does science *know* about mind and intelligence? Can they tell where it comes from and how it works? Most of the time they can't even agree on what it is. You expect me to say Braw is just a senseless body of water in the light of *that* kind of knowledge?"

"They know a lot more than that," she said angrily. "They've studied all kinds of living creatures and found the points of similarity. What would a river use for nerve tissue and how would thought impulses travel?"

DAVE grinned one of the most irritating grins she had ever encountered. "How do you or the scientists *know* they've examined all kinds of living creatures? Maybe they've just studied all of one kind and never thought to look for others. You hung yourself with that argument, old girl."

"Don't call me that!" she flared. "And if you'd rather pick absolutely irrelevant points to quibble about, there's no point in trying to discuss the thing logically."

That should hold *him*. She moved as near the door and as far from Dave Spooner as possible. From the corner of an eye, she saw his cocked eyebrow and a look of—yes, of amusement on his face.

"Man and boy," he drawled slowly, "I've known Braw River for nigh on twenty years and he's been a mighty good friend. 'Course, he's kind of mixed up, trying to decide what to be when he grows up, but he'll fix on something sooner or later. I've been telling him about other rivers so he'd have something to go on.

"For a while, he wanted steam-

boats, like the Mississippi, but I talked him out of that. Then nothing would do but a lot of mills and a big hydroelectric dam. I think he had in mind something about the size of Hoover Dam and it was pretty hard to change his mind that time. Only yesterday, I had to tell him again the old legends about the Rhine and I'm a mite worried about the way he's latched onto the notion of having a bunch of Rhine Maidens living in him. And you can't tell him to dry up—this drought's bad enough already."

Barbara clamped shut her lips while little lightnings of anger played up and down her spine. He was coolly and deliberately teasing her, just as he used to do when they were kids.

"I'd rather not hear any more," she said firmly.

"But this is scientific evidence," argued Dave.

And only minutes ago she had been wishing . . . Oh, simple murder would be too easy for Dave Spooner!

Fortunately, though, Vassar trained its daughters well. She became an icicle in her corner of the pickup seat, letting coldness radiate from her.

"Oh, Lord," said Dave. "Now see what I've done."

And then, unregenerate to the end, he reached out and turned on the heater.

**W**ELL, said Braw, *how was the date?*

Dave, sitting on the river bank at his usual spot, elbows on knees and shoulders slumped, looked up sharply. "How did you know about that?"

*You crossed the bridge alone in the truck and came back with a girl. Later, you took her home. One of the Moffats, wasn't she?*

"Barbara Moffat. You remember, she was the one who tried to stop me from walking the spring ice that time I fell through."

*Sensible girl, approved Braw. Do you like her? Are you going to marry her?*

"Whoa!" said Dave. "You're skipping to conclusions like a shingle in a gale. I like her well enough, I guess, but she wouldn't even say good night after the argument we had."

*Why should you argue? I thought lovers always kissed.*

Dave grinned for the first time in two days, though it was a sad grin. "Folks don't always become lovers on the first date. As for the argument—guess I'd better be the one to tell you. First, promise me you won't hold it against her?"

Braw made a slow, idle whirlpool out beyond the boulder, trapping a few floating sticks. *I promise*, he said impatiently. *Tell me.*

"Well, you've heard how the Ladies' Society is going to bring culture to Enoch Falls? Barbara

started that idea, but part of her program is that folks shouldn't believe in you any more."

Braw's whirlpool stopped. A little rapid near the bank froze, current, froth and bubble.

*Not believe? But I'm real—I exist!*

"Easy, now!" said Dave. "She's been away to college for four years. In the process of getting educated, she lost some of her common sense."

*But that—that's heresy or whatever the word is!* Braw spun the whirlpool at full speed and slammed the boulder with an angry wave.

"Sure," said Dave. "But just calm down. I'll find a way of straightening her out. Somehow."

Braw began to feel a little better. If Dave said he would fix things, then he surely would—though he seemed awfully glum today.

**W**HAT business had that Mof-fat girl upsetting Braw's best friend, anyway? Braw bridled again and thumped his bed with a side current. But then he began remembering the stories Dave had read to him over the years. For some reason, lovers always had a big fight before they got married—silly as it sounded, it seemed to be a tradition.

Somebody had to reunite the lovers and who was the logical

choice for the job? Braw, of course.

He was so tickled with the notion that he shot up a whole cloud of spray—but down below the bend, out of Dave's sight.

A car door slammed near the upper bridge and Dave looked over that way.

"Looks-like we're popular these days," he told Braw. "Now what would the sheriff want?"

Sheriff Higgins was a tall, mild, pleasant man. His two deputies, who also happened to be his nephews, walked slightly behind and flanking him, the result of having seen too many Western movies.

"Hi, Dave," said Higgins. "Lookin' for information. We've got an idea somebody's doin' some bootleggin', either around here or up north a ways. Wondered if you'd seen or heard anything unusual."

"Can't say I have," Dave replied. "Bootleggers, eh? I didn't know there were any left."

"Somebody's shipping a lot of the stuff out of this area. I got orders to keep an eye out, but if they're in my county, I'd like to get 'em myself."

"Wait a second," said Dave and turned to the river. "Braw, have you seen any sign of bootleggers?"

Braw thought. Boot-legging—the term was unfamiliar, but from the sound of it, there must be some wading involved. The littlest



Bassett kids had been wading in him yesterday, but they had been barefooted and he wasn't going to tell the sheriff on them, anyway. If that was illegal, people had better change the laws.

No, said Braw.

But by golly, he thought, as the sheriff turned back to his car still flanked by the suspicious nephews, if he could catch those bootleggers, wouldn't folks be appreciative! It might stop their nagging him to save the crops from this drought. And then he would get Dave's girl back for him.

## V

THE Ladies' Society of Enoch Falls opened their bazaar and cake sale the following morning, Saturday, on the church lawn which sloped down to the river. They needed funds to get the cultural drive rolling and, when that situation occurs, it's just naturally up to the menfolk to watch out for their favorite old pants, pipes and fish rods.

Barbara had been there since eight o'clock, directing the job of setting up the booths, decorating them, helping arrange the displays, settling arguments and performing the other chores which always fall to the chairlady. By early afternoon, her feet hurt, she had a headache from squinting in the bright sunlight, and she was fully

prepared to throttle Mrs. Stewart at the next complaint about the latter's booth location. These symptoms told her the affair was probably a success.

She pushed back a wisp of hair and looked around to see that all the booths were properly manned.

There was Minnie Abbott, being efficient at the White Elephant booth and—and there stood Dave Spooner, bold as a sparrow in the barn yard, buying a cake from Hattie Howe. He seemed to be looking this way and that. Barbara swung quickly around to face the quietly gurgling river.

If he thought he could come around here and tease her some more, well, she'd . . .

She didn't know what she'd do. Probably make a fool of herself by crying, because she was so tired and nervy-edged. She wished he would just go away.

But then she sensed someone behind her and all she could do was stiffen and glare down at the river.

"Hello, Barbara." His voice sounded less easy and assured than usual. "I stopped by to see how your bazaar was doing. You've done a good job. Looks as though you'll make out fine."

He edged into view around her shoulder, but she kept her gaze fixed on the drought-browned lawn and the water below.

"Thank you," she said frigidly.

"Look," said Dave, stepping squarely around where she couldn't possibly see past him. "I—well, I don't know any fancy way to say it, but I'm sorry about the other night."

He leaned toward her intently, the cake forgotten in his big hands, and his thumbs unconsciously dug into the icing. There was a fast jungle rhythm beating in her chest and she didn't have a headache any more.

"Take your thumbs out of the cake, you big oaf," she said. "Oh, Dave—let's just forget it happened!"

**H**IS smile broke slowly, like sunrise over the mountains, and she smiled back, feeling light as a leaf on the wind, and gay and a little foolish, and not caring at all.

Then Dave's smile faded to a look of puzzlement and Barbara became aware of shouts and a strange rushing sound. Dave spun around and they both stared at Braw River, now halfway up the church lawn and coming on at a gallop. His quiet gurgling had grown a dozen times louder and was broken by sporadic explosions that sounded almost like titanic hiccoughs.

"What's happening? The booths will be ruined!" cried Barbara.

Dave dropped his cake and sprinted toward the water. She

heard him shout, "*Braw — Braw River!* Get back, you idiot!"

A separate arm detached itself from the rising waters and came galumphing like a happy pup, straight for Dave. Barbara yelled a warning, but the water reared at Dave's chest. He went down sprawling and then Barbara was soaked to the waist and trying to keep her feet while waves broke against the booths, dashing cakes, pies and second-hand clothing into the struggling knot of customers and salesladies.

Suddenly the waters drained back with a great rush and Barbara found herself rolled over on the wet grass. Down at a level just below Dave, the river stopped and began bubbling, frothing and throwing up spray.

The bazaar was completely wrecked. A mob of wet, furious women, looking surrealistic with bright-colored icing and pie filling dabbed and smeared over them, were advancing on Dave.

Up at the street, the men who had been waiting for their wives were staggering with laughter, holding each other up while they brayed. Barbara shot a poisoned stare that way, but they could wait.

She was the first to reach Dave Spooner. He had his fists on his hips and he appeared to be cussing out the river. It only made Barbara madder that he should continue the farce at a time like this.

"What do you think you're doing?" demanded Dave. "Look at the mess you made of the bazaar."

*'m shorry*, said Braw, letting contrite wavelets lap near Dave's feet. *Mishjudged m' distance*.

Dave stared blankly at him. "Hey, you're drunk as a goat!"

*Drunk? Don't be shil—foolish*. The women behind Dave were making angry mutterings. It didn't matter. They were Braw's friends. Everybody was his friend.

"Did somebody pour some liquid into you?" Dave seemed awfully suspicious for some reason.

Braw thought hard. *Nope*.

"Well, was anything at all unusual dumped into you?"

**B**RAW couldn't see any reason for all this, but it was his ole pal Dave who asked, so he thought hard again. *Jush — just some wet sawdust*.

Dave was scowling at that.

"Wet sawdust? That shouldn't do anything, unless—mash! If those bootleggers dumped fermented mash in Braw, that could have done it."

*Bootleggers*, said Braw happily. A gigantic hiccough shook his current. *'m a hero, Dave, ole buddy. Caught the bootleggers for you*.

Barbara wasn't inclined to wait through such nonsense. "Dave Spooner," she said ominously, "if you can talk to that river, you'd better start telling him exactly

what we think about this! He's ruined our booths and everything we had to sell, even the clothes we're wearing!"

The women surrounding them agreed angrily.

"But he's not responsible," said Dave. "He's tight as a termite in rock maple. Apparently those bootleggers Sheriff Higgins is after . . ."

"We all heard you saying that and we're not interested. Look what that river has done. We'll have to replace those booths for the church and that'll cost more than we've made. I still say that river isn't alive, but if he were, a reprehensible character like that doesn't belong around a decent community!"

Dave blinked at her. *Say something, darn you! Whose side are you on?* she thought furiously, feeling the moist pressure of tears just behind her eyelids.

"But, Barbara, he's said he's sorry. And he's caught the bootleggers who caused all the trouble!"

There was a stir at that. The menfolk had come down the lawn, dry and still chortling, and joined the mob. A loud belch sounded out in the middle of the river and there was a churning in Braw's current.

*Bootleggers*, he repeated cheerily. *Caught 'em red-handed—wading!*

And up on the church lawn at

their feet, waterlogged and spluttering, but very much alive and exceedingly mad, Braw deposited Sheriff Higgins and his two deputies.

WHEN Dave got down to his favorite fishing spot the next afternoon, Braw was burbling sickly to himself.

"Hi," said Dave.

Braw made a sound of misery. He was a great aching torrent of nausea from bank to bank.

"Hangover," said Dave. "Guess the best thing I can do is leave you in peace."

*Is the sheriff still mad at me?*

"Well, he's not exactly happy, but he caught the bootleggers after you told me where the mash was dumped into you. I guess he was pretty surprised when he started to wade that little brook and found himself out in the middle of you."

*He sure yelled.* Braw began to chuckle, then groaned instead. His bed didn't feel any too steady. At times, in fact, it seemed as if the whole countryside were rolling and pitching under him.

"I'd get you some aspirin, but I don't think there's enough in Vermont to do you any good."

Much as he appreciated Dave's solicitude, it didn't help. Nothing helped. He wished he had some Braw Maidens to comfort him and sing dirges.

"But if you think the sheriff

was raging," said Dave, "you should hear the Ladies' Society of Enoch Falls."

*Is that Moffat girl still mad at you?*

"Like a Jersey heifer running wild," said Dave. "I'm afraid you finally made her believe in you against all her schooling, so now she's sore at both of us."

Braw made a couple of unhappy gulps. He couldn't manage anything more at the moment because a huge bubble of gas was forming and threatening to turn his main stream inside out.

"Matter of fact," continued Dave, "all the women in town are mad—at you for wrecking the bazaar, at me for standing up for you, at the menfolk for laughing."

Far upstream, the enormous gas bubble bobbed elastically. At last it broke loose, sailing majestically up and up through all Braw's suffering layers. It burst in what was probably the most magnificent belch in recorded history.

Braw relaxed gratefully.

"What you need is relief," said Dave. "Maybe I can think of something to help."

Two hours later, his pickup came down the North Road and stopped in the middle of the upper bridge, close to the railing.

Dave climbed into the back of the truck and pried the tops off two large fiber drums. He rolled the first drum into position, braced

one foot on the bridge rail and heaved to let the contents slide into Braw, just as a car pulled up alongside.

Eben Stewart poked his bald, sunburned head out.

"What's that you're dumpin', young Spooner?" he demanded suspiciously.

"Bicarb," said Dave, reaching for the other drum.

Eben paused to consider. "Guess he needs it," he said and drove off.

**N**OT a woman in Enoch Falls was talking to her man or any man. A number of those who had spare bedrooms had moved into them and any necessary communication was handled either through the children or in monosyllables.

When Barbara Moffat entered Abbott's store the following morning to get sugar and baking powder for her mother, a small knot of men down in back were crying their woes, but not a woman was in sight.

Lyle Abbott greeted her rather sheepishly and Barbara told him what she wanted, pointedly keeping her back to the men.

"I tell you," said a voice she recognized as Floyd Howe's, "I don't know what things is comin' to. The woman ain't said a word to me for two days, just as if I could o' helped laughin' when Braw came

a-swarmin up into that bazaar."

"Ain't enough gettin' blamed for that," said Sam Taylor, "I swear mine thinks I'm to fault for the dry spell an' my crops spoilin'."

"I tell you, Braw's got to help us," added Floyd. "If he don't, they'll be hard times in the valley. Some might even have to sell out."

"Why should Braw help one an' not help all?" demanded Ed Sutton. "Dave Spooner's got good green corn an' here ourn is sick an' spindlin' as an ailin' calf."

"Mebbe Braw would help. All we got is Spooner's word that he won't—an' who's the one that gains from that?"

Barbara spun on the group so suddenly that Lyle Abbott dropped a box of salt.

"Well!" she said, surveying them sharply. "A fine group of hard-working farmers, weeping about your troubles instead of trying to do something about them and throwing the blame on the one man who might help you."

"You wouldn't be a mite sweet on Dave, would you?" asked Ed Sutton slyly. The men laughed.

**B**ARBARA clenched her hands to keep her fingers from trembling and the sudden tightness in her chest nearly choked off her words.

"Just because Dave Spooner and I can't ever agree," she said, "does-

n't change the fact that he's the first person in Enoch Falls who ever realized Braw River had feelings and emotions, the first one to give it more than the time of day and not expect a favor in return."

"Seems to me only last week somebody was sayin' Braw's nothing but an ordinary river," Ed told the men.

"Easy, now," said Sam Taylor. "Maybe she hates the plain sight of Dave Spooner an' maybe she don't, but it kind of strikes me Barbara's talkin' sense."

"Nope, she's too educated for that," said Ed and there were two or three guffaws.

Barbara turned and walked blindly out of the store, churning inside with rage that she knew was futile. If only she had defied her father and never come back to Enoch Falls!

She heard quick footsteps and then Lyle Abbott thrust a package into her hands.

"You left this," he said, a troubled expression on his wrinkled face. "An' don't take no mind o' Sutton. Down inside, he knows he don't amount to anythin', so he takes it out on them that do. The troubles we got this year won't be solved by the likes of him."

She managed a shaky smile of thanks and Lyle turned back to his store. Barbara realized as she walked on that she hadn't fully understood how bad things were,

that the farmers actually faced ruin for lack of rain.

She and all the other women were mad at the men for their callous hilarity over the bazaar incident, but it hadn't occurred to her until now that perhaps they were *too* angry over a small thing. There was an element of near-hysteria in the women's vindictiveness.

A meeting of the women had already been decided upon. They should be assembling by now. Barbara glanced at her watch and walked faster, hoping her mother had the sandwiches ready.

To get away from all men and be certain of privacy, the meeting was going to be an outdoor lunch affair at the village picnic knoll beyond Prather's Corner. She didn't have much time left. Once the discussion started, it would be up to her to see that it was held to the point.

## VI

DAVE Spooner was on his kitchen porch, sanding down an old dry sink preparatory to re-finishing it, and wondering how he could convince Braw that something must be done about the valley's crops. Only this morning, Dave had been down to look at his corn. He had been shocked at the contrast between his, green and thrifty, and Eben Stewart's just

across the fence, dry, stunted and yellow. His oats, too, were well up. In a week, they'd be ready to cut and chop for green silage, while Eben's were just a runty stubble.

How could he convince Braw that he *had* to help the others? What reward might be tempting? The only thing Braw seemed to want at the moment was Rhine Maidens.

When Dave finished the dry sink, he would go down and put the problem squarely up to Braw. Thank goodness the hangover had been gone this morning when Dave had stopped by the bridge for a moment. If Braw had still had it, there would be no talking to him.

Dave was scraping at a stubborn corner of the sink when he heard a car coming too fast from the direction of the upper bridge. Almost at the same moment, the fire horn in the village began hooting wildly.

Dave dropped his sanding block and stood irresolute, trying to figure a connection and waiting for the coded blasts of the horn that would tell where the emergency was.

Then Eben Stewart's old Dodge spun recklessly into the yard and stopped in a spray of gravel, inches from Dave's porch.

"Git in!" yelled Eben. "Dad-blamed Braw done it agin!"

Dave jumped for the car while

it was in reverse and moving. He wrenched open the door on the run and swung precariously into the seat as Eben slammed the car into gear and shot back onto the road.

Through the open window, Dave heard the fire horn blasting a frantic series of threes—Prather's Corner.

"What's Braw done?" he asked tensely.

"Done!" echoed Eben, keeping his eyes on the gravel road. "He's got sixty-odd women an' a troop o' Brownie Scouts trapped on the picnic knoll behind thutty feet o' water!"

NEVER did Dave let himself think about that ride afterward, nor about the scene they found at the picnic ground. For sheer confusion, it could be paralleled only by a mob of undisciplined Saracens about to storm a Christian citadel, with the Christian women wailing and praying on the highest battlement beyond the moat.

The moat, of course, was an arm of Braw River sweeping around the knoll.

The fire truck was there and the first men on the spot had been trying to span Braw's arm with ladders, but he had simply broadened and deepened the arm so they couldn't reach across. Now the men were running in circles,

shouting orders to which nobody paid the least attention. The chief of the volunteers, Lyle Abbott, stood on the truck, bawling instructions for rigging a lifeline, and was totally ignored. When he saw Dave coming on the run, he wig-wagged frantically and climbed down to meet him. Immediately, they were surrounded by angry men, all yelling.

"Wait a minute!" Dave belatedly, holding up his arms.

"... get a line out there and take 'em off," Lyle was ordering and then subsided in embarrassment.

"No fancy rescues will work unless Braw wants them to," said Dave. "And then they wouldn't be needed. Let me talk to him."

He pushed through the men to the edge of Braw's arm and strode along it, looking for a suitable boulder or tree that Braw could use to speak against.

Braw saw him coming and made a shout against the bole of a small hemlock a few yards upstream. He chuckled when Dave stopped opposite the tree.

*Don't look so desperate. See what I've got—Braw Maidens!*

"Oh, Lord!" Dave groaned. "Are you drunk again?"

*No, I'm not, said Braw testily. And I wish you wouldn't bring that up. Actually, I'm doing you a favor.*

"Doing me a favor?" exclaimed

ed Dave in blank-faced horror.

An angry clamor broke out from the men behind him, demanding to know what was going on. He had to shout them down again. The women over on the knoll, thirty very wet feet away, had huddled together and fallen silent, every anxious eye on Dave.

"Do you mean to tell me," asked Dave, choosing his words carefully, "that you trapped all those women, not to mention those little Girl Scouts or whatever, as a favor to me?"

*You talk as if I'd damaged them or something, said Braw. If you're going to lecture me, I'll . . .*

"I won't lecture. You might just say I'm sort of overwhelmed."

*I thought you'd be pleased. And it is fun pretending they're Braw Maidens, although most of them have done nothing but scream since I stepped in here. That Stewart woman could send chills through a glacier.*

"Uh—Braw," said Dave, aware of an impatient muttering behind him, "what was this favor you were doing me?"

**B**RAW was a bit disappointed in Dave. Surely he should have seen the point by now. But maybe he was thinking of the others and not considering his own interests. That would be like him.

*It's simple enough, said Braw modestly. I thought of it all by*



myself. Just holler across and ask your girl to marry you. Soon as she agrees, I'll let them all go.

"I can't say a thing like that here!"

*Sure you can. Everybody knows you're sweet on her. I've heard them say so.*

"But—"

Eben Stewart's voice interrupted. "Dave Spooner, what in blue-nosed Hades is all this yammerin' about? Is Braw goin' to let our wimmenfolk go or ain't he?"

Braw watched Dave turn slowly around. "Braw says he'll let them go as soon as I ask a question and get the right answer. Only it's not easy."

He faced around again and called, "Barbara—Barbara Moffat!"

She stepped out of the group of women, a slim, appealing figure in slacks, with her hair down over her shoulders. Braw thought she had the look of a new bride just come from the church and he began to feel all misty, like a foggy morning. Apparently Dave felt the same way, for he was looking across at her numbly.

Then Dave took a deep breath and kind of choked on it and finally spoke up in a clear, carrying voice. "Barbara, will you marry me?"

*Good for you!* said Braw, tickled.

Barbara gasped and her face went pink, and men and women alike shouted angrily. Dave's

shoulders were slumped, but he put both hands up and the noise quieted down again.

"That's what I've got to ask, if you want your wives and kids back," he said doggedly.

On the knoll, Barbara snorted. "Don't feel forced to ask me anything you wouldn't of your own free will, Dave Spooner!"

Braw himself snorted at that and they all jumped. Who was she to talk to his friend Dave like that? But Dave was hollering right back.

"Doggone it, Barbara, if you weren't stubborn as a hill farm, I'd have asked you days ago—and it wouldn't have been in front of the whole population, either!"

"Oh, Dave!" she said faintly.

*That's the idea! Don't take no for an answer. Sweep her into your arms!*

"How long do you think my arms are?" asked Dave.

**B**ARBARA was beginning to understand what was behind Braw's sudden encirclement of the Ladies' Society and their children. As she watched Dave, alternately talking to the river and listening to the rapid gurglings that only he could interpret, she felt awed by Braw's tremendous loyalty to Dave, which far outweighed his childish reasoning that had led to this situation. If he felt that way toward the whole village, he would

probably find a way to help the farmers. But Dave was the only one who had ever troubled to understand Braw, the only friend in what must be a terribly lonely existence.

Lonely—for centuries.

"Dave!" she called urgently.

He looked up quickly.

"Ask Braw if he'd like to have someone with him always—never be lonely again."

Braw made a noise against the little hemlock and Dave turned back to him.

*What's she getting at?* asked Braw uneasily.

"I don't rightly know," Dave confessed. "But you have been lonely. You've often said as much."

*Well—that was mostly before you were born.*

"But I won't live long enough by your standards," Dave pointed out.

*Don't talk like that. Make her say what she means.*

"What are you talking about, Barbara?" Dave shouted.

The group of men and the knot of women were silent. Most of them wore expressions that indicated they would like to be notified if matters ever came back to an earthly plane.

Barbara said, "Ask him if he'd like to be married himself!"

Braw gave a huge gulping sound and the flow of his arm

faltered momentarily. Dave said, "What?" and then repeated the question.

*Me? asked Braw. Married?*

He savored the idea and did a small gavotte at Dave's feet.

*Married!* said Braw.

"You'd never be lonesome, that's sure, but I—" Dave raised his voice to carry to Barbara. "I don't get it. What are you driving at?"

"Did he answer? What did he say?" demanded Barbara.

**S**HOOTING out two small, liquid arms near where she stood, Braw lifted them slightly at the tips and performed a happy pat-a-eake. She smiled at him. Now here was a girl with spirit and sense. She'd better not waste any time. The sooner she married Dave, the better.

"I like you, Braw," she said, loudly enough for Dave to hear. "If we villagers get together to bring you a wife, will you help the farmers out of the terrible fix they're in?"

There was suddenly a new quality to the silence of the villagers. What Barbara had asked was plain enough to follow. Their futures and even their farms swung yes or no, stay or go, on the answer. The summer air was chilled with their intense expectancy.

*Gosh, yes,* said Braw to Dave, *if they don't mind taking turns. Tell her, yes—quick!*

"Just a second," said Dave. "Barbara, I've got one question and only because Braw is my friend, just as you're . . . Barbara, can we honestly deliver on your promise?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, Dave!"

"Then that's his answer, too!"

And the men of Enoch Falls pummeled each other, while the women on the knoll laughed or wept—according to their temperaments—in each other's arms, even some who hadn't spoken to each other for weeks.

"Barbara!" Dave shouted above the uproar. "How?"

"Cut a shallow channel beside the North Road and let Claire Stream through the pass to join Braw!"

*I'm going to have a wife!* sang Braw and humped up a bridal arch that soared twenty feet above the meadow.

Without a moment's hesitation or fear, Barbara ran under his liquid bridge and Braw laughed to see her, for there just naturally wasn't any place else to go but into the arms of Dave Spooner.

IT took only five days and plenty of willing manpower, using the village road equipment to cut a channel through the lowest part of the pass that would let the waters of demure Claire Stream drop to the bed of her impatient bridegroom.

Five days was also the wait that Dave and Barbara had to suffer through, after getting the fastest blood tests on record and buying the license up in Paisley, where Dave's uncle was County Clerk.

So it was a double ceremony, held outdoors at the spot where the rivers would join. The choir sang "Oh, Promise Me" and Mrs. Stewart flatted only twice. Then the Reverend Townley went through the whole lovely ceremony and hardly stuttered at all. Barbara's mother wept enough to go into the river business herself.

Finally, they were pronounced man, river and wives. Dave kissed Barbara as if he might never get the chance again, and the signal was given to open the water gates up above. Claire Stream came stepping daintily down her new course and Braw at last received his bride.

When you drive through a sleepy-looking Vermont village with a well-behaved river running an ox-bow curve through it, be sure you take a good look. If you see busy fingers of water threading the crops sixty feet and more above the river level, watch your language—Braw doesn't permit profanity within hearing of his wife.



# The Paynim's Flute

By RALPH SPENCER

*It was a most wondrous magical  
instrument . . . but who would have  
to pay the piper . . . and with what?*

Illustrated by VIDMER

**T**HERE were four of them; they were hungry and one was wounded. They were frightened, too, for all were serfs attached to the seigneurie of St. Etienne and they were escaping their lawful master. In fifteenth century France, this was a risky procedure.

Maçon was the eldest, a man of muscle and girth and middle age. Undoubtedly he had been properly christened, but he had been called Maçon, that is, "Bricklayer," so long that only he remembered his saint's name. The callouses on his rough hands were getting soft from not working at his usual occupation.

With Maçon were his frail but strong-hearted wife, Jeanne, and

their fourteen-year-old son, Robert, who eventually would also be known only as Maçon. The boy had fine features and bronzed, curly hair; he was rather small and slender for his predestined trade.

The fourth was the Paynim, a dark man with a sense of humor, and of an age no one could guess.

The Paynim had come from unknown parts. He said he was brought back by the knights who went to fight the Turks for Constantinople. When the knights disclaimed memory of him, the Paynim only laughed and said they were drunk ever since leaving the Isle of Rhodes. This was thought by some to be a reasonable explanation.

In the St. Etienne locality, the Paynim had considerable fame as a destroyer of poisonous reptiles which he immobilized by playing to them on a small brass flute, a recorder.

THE Paynim had been thus engaged in cleansing Maçon's garden when Gilles de Laval, Seigneur of Rais, led a body of armed retainers into the church at St. Etienne at Mass, seized its lord, Jean le Ferron, by the throat and threw him in chains along with all his household. Gilles' men then went looking for the Paynim whose legitimate occupation was that of page and buffoon to Ferron.

Maçon, Jeanne and Robert were as alarmed as the Paynim, for Gilles de Laval—more often called Gilles de Rais—was none other than Bluebeard, bestial and deadly, especially to children. It was well known among the peasantry that Gilles' men kidnaped handsome boys for him, and that he roasted and ate them in his gloomy castles of Tiffauges and Machecoul in the nearby barony of Rais. The evil spirit "La Maffraye," or someone disguised as such, scoured the countryside in gray cloak and black mask and pointed out young shepherd lads or plowboys to Gilles' tough mounted soldiers.

So Maçon, Jeanne, Robert and the Paynim fled together. They managed to get some distance from

St. Etienne, but because of their circuitous route—made necessary to avoid pursuit—they were never as far from the boundaries of Rais as they would have liked to be.

Maçon tried to find work, but there was none for masterless men. The masons' guild in the towns could not help a man who was still a scrf.

"Vagabonds!" snapped the wealthy citizens and let loose dogs to tear their clothing.

"They might be sold for slaves," opined various knights and petty lords, and laid plans which narrowly failed to apprehend them.

Their only hope was to avoid attracting attention. So the four left the highroads and wormed their way through forest, marshes and over rugged hills along paths that skirted the fertile fields, vineyards and orchards of the Loire valley. Food was a problem, frequently an unsolved problem.

They were scratched, mud-plastered and distraught as they emerged from a tangle of windfall on the edge of a field. On the other side of the field was a village.

The Paynim, who had made the last league leaning on Maçon, moaned and shoved up his smock to examine a badly swollen ankle.

"I think it's broken," he said. "Fractured fibula when I slipped on that wet log. Nothing to be done but get to Bellevue hospital at once. I'm going to America for a while."



Maçon, Robert and Jeanne gasped, in spite of their own distress.

"What manner of speech is this!" demanded Maçon. "If it be an incantation to summon devils . . ."

"Oh, stow it," said the Paynim. "You think I'm an evil spirit?"

"Yes," said Maçon simply.

"Well, all right, I'm going back to limbo to have my leg mended. Once they were about to throw me into the clink for illegal fortune telling, but they may have forgotten. I need a rope."

**A** PEASANT came along their edge of the field, plowing up winter fallow with his wife and a calf yoked to the plow.

The Paynim stared at the peasant's plow rope. Then he put the flute to his lips and blew a weird, lilting, soothing and wavering melody. A great snake rose out of the furrow and caused the plowman to climb on the plow and shriek. The peasant's wife, rubbing the whip marks on her back, contemplated the scene with interest and evident neutrality.

The plowman yelled for help. Some barefooted peasants came across the field from the village, but they were still some distance away and not hurrying.

The Paynim hopped on his good leg closer to the plow and said between flute notes, "Deliver me your plow rope, good husbandman—but

as a loan—and I'll deliver you from the serpent."

"Anything!" screamed the plowman.

The Paynim simply stopped his music and tucked the flute back into his waistband. The snake wavered, collapsed and was gone.

The plowman fled toward the villagers and fell sobbing at the feet of the curé, who was the last to arrive. They all stood at a safe distance while the Paynim painfully coiled up the rope, lifted the flute with one hand for a few more bars, and tossed the coil into the air. It went up and stayed there, hanging as though caught on something, its upper end out of sight in the mist.

"Well, adieu, Maçon," said the Paynim, throwing off his smock and remaining almost naked except for a loin cloth and turban. "Get ready to run when these good people come out of their trance!"

He began to climb, laboriously, a few inches at a time, one leg limp and useless, the other wound around the rope. He held the flute in one hand as he slid that hand up the rope, and every time his head came near the flute he played a little more of the music.

It was a very awkward procedure and as the Paynim reached the top of the rope, the inevitable happened—he dropped the flute. Energetically he snatched hold of something in the mist and hung

there as the rope twined down, around and around on itself, to lie at Maçon's feet.

"Even if I could ever make it down, I'd never make it back," Paynim shouted. "Keep the flute, good Maçon, I owe you something, anyway. Play on it, but always think hard, when you play, of what you want most!"

The Paynim wriggled painfully up into the mist. Then there was nothing above but blue sky.

The villagers murmured. They were several dozen strong by this time. The priest shook his crucifix.

Maçon picked up the flute gingerly—but, after all, he knew the Paynim had always been friendly. He essayed a few experimental notes and found that as long as he blew his breath into it, the flute played music—not *his* music—but its own.

**H**E was not conscious of deliberately thinking of anything, but of course he was. He had never stopped thinking of it since this journey began. He was thinking of a fine roast ham, with a big river carp lying on a bed of cress on a platter at one side, and a full store of peas and loaves of bread, with wine of Anjou in earthen jugs, all on a table decked with white linen.

Before Maçon's very eyes a table erected itself, its linen cover sweeping the plowed ground, and on it a ham in a silver tray with a carp

beside it, loaves of bread, peas in bowls and jugs of wine.

Maçon was so startled that he lowered the flute, whereupon the table wavered, the ham turned transparent—the shadow of a ham. Maçon immediately played again. He was no selfish lout but a man of family responsibility, was Maçon. If he could not eat, for the need of playing on the brass flute, Jeanne and Robert should eat. He waved them to fall to, and they did, ravenously.

There was a rush from the villagers and they rent the ham and the fish, sharing both among them all, and gnawed into the bread, along with Jeanne and Robert. But especially they drank the wine and the jugs went around until some of the peasants began to stagger.

When all had dined, and the drunken villagers were singing and dancing, Maçon tucked the flute under his arm and flung himself on the scraps. He managed to do away with half a loaf of bread and several chunks of meat before the whole banquet turned to a wisp of vapor and drifted away.

Maçon was still stumbling around the scene looking for crumbs when he became aware that he was more starved than ever.

"I'm hungry again," wailed Robert.

Jeanne clasped her thin stomach.

The villagers glared at each other dumfounded.



The drunken revelers stood stone sober full of anger.

The priest waved his crucifix aloft like a banner. "Black magic! Impostors! Deceivers!" he yelled, and led the rush.

Maçon, Jeanne and Robert barely made it back into the forest, where the villagers halted. Dangerous magicians! It needed an exorcism before any further pursuit.

**T**HE abbey of St. Denis du Lac was undergoing reconstruction. Maçon's craftsman's spirit exulted even over his hunger pangs as he saw the noble scale of the foundations for chapel, dormitories, garden close, almonry and kitchens, stables, cellerage and refectory—that last, most important.

The abbot sat in a gilded chair on a lawn, under a pear tree, surrounded by his secretaries, his lap full of the architect's drawings. He gave unnecessary orders to hired masons, who passed on their own versions to the sweat-stained monks who were lugging squared stones into place.

Maçon pressed forward and fell at the abbot's feet, indeed he could hardly stand, so faint was he.

"Work," he begged. "My son and I are good masons."

"I have all the labor I can pay for," said the abbot.

"I work, oh, vastly faster than these you have hired," sobbed Maçon.

It was after the abbot's supper, and he had dined well. He winked at his secretaries who winked back.

"We'll try you," he said. "The men are stopping soon for the night. You can work after they are gone. If in the morning we find you have built the abbey, your reward will be great." He roared with laughter at his own joke, lifted his robe and slid out of the chair—which was in turn lifted by a monk—and led a procession back to the old abbey's dilapidated buildings.

Maçon's head swam so from hunger that he lost all reverence. He was filled with most uncharitable feelings toward the jocular churchman. Jeanne and Robert quietly raided the pear tree and gave him some of the fruit, which helped a little as far as the faintness went, but left him unsatisfied in his rage. He fondled the flute. *Well, well, we'll see*, thought Maçon.

The next morning the monk whose duty it was to sound for morning service overslept, because the early sun no longer appeared through the breach in the wall of his cell. He rose and looked out, and what he saw sent him to perpetrate such an alarm jangle on the bells as was never heard except long ago when Northmen raided.

**T**HE monks, streaming out with the abbot, stared in stupefaction at a noble structure, a com-

plete abbey; walls, corridors, arches in colonnade around the cloisters, and room after room designed for a thousand more than their number.

They sang of the miracle as they walked two by two through all this, and finally they found Jeanne and Robert on their knees under the pear tree, with Maçon playing wearily on the brass flute.

Maçon took the instrument from his lips only long enough to mutter, "Food, we hunger after our labors, Reverend Father!" and continued his gentle, sustaining tune.

The abbot gave orders in bated breath, monks scurried back to the kitchens and brought out bread and beef prepared for their own breakfast. Jeanne and Robert gorged themselves, but Maçon gathered his share with one hand into a napkin, never stopping his music.

The cellarer came dashing up, his robe held like an apron, and staggering under the weight of the gold coins that filled it.

"They are piled high in the vaults," he shouted.

Maçon remembered that at one moment his mind had drifted to his probable pay for the erection of the abbey, and he had thought of gold money as he witched up the abbey walls.

"Give some to these holy men," said the jolly abbot, "and discharge all those lazy swine we hired for

bricklayers." He selected a pouch, not too large, from a begging friar, had it filled with gold and handed it over. "Eat, eat," the abbot invited Maçon. "Do you wish more delicate viands?"

"My heart is so filled with joy by this righteous accomplishment," gasped Maçon, between breaths into the mouthpiece of his instrument, "that I can not fill my fleshly stomach now. Later when we have performed more good works, I may satisfy myself." He led Jeanne and Robert along the path back to the forest, playing all the way. They had to steady him as he stumbled.

Some time went by, while the Maçon family struggled through the woods—Jeanne and Robert dulled by repletion, and Maçon by the lack of it—the monks meanwhile singing the *Te Deum* at the gates of their stately monastery.

That is, the monks sang until Brother Ildefonse, the local saint, crossed himself repeatedly and approached the Superior. "Reverend Father, there is a waft of most heathen incense in the air, such sandalwood as the infidels far to the East are wont to burn. On mission I smelled it. I fear there is not other than Devils' work—"

"Nonsense!" said the abbot crustily. "What if it is so? Did not Jean de Malestroït, Bishop of Nantes, accept with pleasure the rich and beautiful cathedral of Saint Hilare-le-Grand at Tiffauges, and

the lovely collegiate church of the Holy Innocents at Machecoul, built and donated by Gilles de Rais, in spite of strong suspicion of most foul personal life and fiendish commerce with the powers of evil by that same Bluebeard? What is good enough for the Bishop of Nantes is—"

He broke off in horror, as the entire abbey—stables, dormitories, chapel, cellarage and refectory—vanished in puffs of smoke or cloud.

**W**HAT had happened was simply that Maçon, having traveled with Jeanne and Robert out of sight of the abbey, could restrain himself no longer. He stopped playing and proceeded to make the first real meal in weeks on the food he had brought along.

An ejaculation from Robert aroused Maçon from his after-breakfast torpor. Robert had been carrying the bag of money given them by the abbot—and the bag was flat as a pancake.

Maçon, fully alarmed, hurried his little troop up the ridge to where they could look back again. Of course, the abbey was gone and the monks were holding an indignation meeting, the abbot waving his arms and undoubtedly cursing Maçon with bell, book and candle. Soon a number of the brothers mounted donkeys with stout beards and summoners in attendance

and started toward the wooded ridge.

When the fugitives turned to flee, they saw that, still worse, in the valley on the other side of the ridge was a long single file of the villagers they had first met, all armed with cudgels, scythes on poles and other deadly weapons.

The two pursuing forces were rather close together here, but the valleys diverged, and Maçon, Jeanne and Robert hurried along the line of greatest separation. It led them northward toward the Loire river, toward the barony of Rais, but there was no other way.

**T**HE next day near the river, Maçon and his family—again footsore, bramble-torn and dirty—came upon the castle of Brieuze, standing on a hillock with its wattle village nestled near it.

The drawbridge was down, the gates were open, and a magnificent festival in honor of the marriage of the Sieur de Brieuze was in progress. Colorful dandies and silken-clad ladies with their hennins stiff as two horns on their heads moved in rainbow hues in and out of the great hall.

Maçon led Jeanne and Robert through the entrance, hoping for hospitality, some drippings and crusts from the feast which might be given out of customary charity. However, the three were such tatterdemalion objects that a guard

barred the entrance to the festival with his spear and the provost came up and threatened a flogging if they did not remove their ill-omened, searecrow presences immediately.

The poor wretches slunk behind the scullery where they could smell the tantalizing odors of swill that was not for them, and Maçon took counsel with himself.

"The gold that the flute made in the abbey vanished when the flute notes ceased," he reasoned. His wife and son were watching him fearfully and hopefully. "The food made by the flute, in the same way, was lost to us. But the food we got from the old abbey in payment for building the new one was good and real. It was not made by the flute, but baked the day before, belike. Now if we had something to sell these arrogant and spiteful people for money they have already—"

**H**E lifted the flute and began to play, sitting in the mire where the slops were thrown from the scullery.

The wench who came out to empty a wooden tub full of dirty dishwater over the unwanted beggars got the shock of her life. The tub slipped unheeding from her fingers as she heaved it back for the fling, hit the wall behind her and spilled a flood over her own bare feet while she stood open-mouthed.

Jeanne was garbed in white samite. Robert wore a full gown of purple velvet, with a belt of silver-work around his waist, and was plaing on Maçon's shoulders a gorgcous robe of gold brocade to hide his rags, the while Maçon continued his lilting melody on the flute.

Then they lifted sundry other suits and robes from the ground—Maçon, without experience in bolted goods, had merely visualized the most costly tailored garments and ornaments he could imagine—and wended their way around the corner toward the entrance of the great hall.

The maid fled back into the kitchen, stunned to a wondering silence.

**T**HE warder admitted them unhesitatingly, merchants of rare luxuries were always welcome, always timely.

They entered in procession behind Maçon's flute, Jeanne crying, "Cheap, cheap, cheap, my Lords and Ladies, but wondrous fair!"

Jeanne sold the garments, shouting and laughing and making little effort to haggle. She sold them cheap, but for silver, and they were snatched up right and left. That a few were muddled where they had lain on the ground back of the scullery made no difference—they were bargains!

The Sieur de Bricuce elbowed

his way through the press, snatched a vestment lined with marten fur, and immediately dived behind a pillar and shouted to his squires to dress him.

They heard him laughing, "Monstrous fine! But hot. Off with everything! I'll wear this next to my skin!"

Others were following his example.

Jeanne and Robert ate greedily from trenchers on the tables and no one said them nay. Then they stuffed their pockets with gobbets of meat and loaves for Maçon, and took up their procession behind his flute again, marching toward the gate.

Just outside the wall, Maçon caught his foot in the fringe of his unaccustomed garment and fell full length, the flute flying out ahead. He leaped to his feet unhurt and with agility, for now he was clad only in his own shaggy clothes, as were Jeanne and Robert in theirs.

Retrieving the flute, Maçon led the three in a wild dash away from the castle, but not before they heard the shouts, the peals of feminine merriment, the cries of rage, the demands.

"Hey, stupid squire, my shirt!"

"My hose!"

"Damn these laces!"

All in all, there was enough confusion for Maçon, Jeanne and Robert to make the woodland

fringe along the river before the knights and men-at-arms sallied out, screaming for blood.

As the fugitives ran and Maçon gnawed some of the food that they had won, they all saw coming from the south, over the broad fields, the other two bodies of pursuers: armed peasants following their priest, and a long procession of monks on donkeys with the Abbot whooping them on as he viewed his quarry. There was no way to go but along the river and over the border into Rais.

The pursuers stopped at the frontier, for no one lightly invaded the realm of the redoubtable Gilles, and mounted archers of the Seigneur de Rais were clattering up to see what was intended.

Among the archers rode the one the countryside called "La Maffrey."

**M**ACON was not a brave man, his heart churning as he trudged wearily down the highroad toward the gloomy castle of Machecoul, residence of Gilles de Rais.

The dust of the cavalcade of archers who had reft Robert away in one swift charge—plucking him up and swirling him onto the back of a horse, knocking Maçon and Jeanne in the dust and spurting rapidly—was settling around the Machecoul gate while Maçon was screwing up his courage to follow.

The spectacle of Jeanne, wild-eyed and gasping, hobbling along by herself decided him.

They found the Machecoul drawbridge down, but so, also, was the portcullis, a grating of iron bars too close together for a man to wriggle through.

A guard leaned out the upper window of a tower over the gate and laughed at them. He turned to call, "Poitou!" and a young man, with a hard and evil face in which there was also something of fear and frenzy, appeared beside the guard.

"If you come with petitions, or if you come for money to betray your lords to my lord," called Poitou, "you must wait the morning levee. The noble seigneur is busy now on his private, very private enjoyments!" He laughed wildly, in blood-curdling wise.

Maçon had his own very good idea of what the seigneur's enjoyments might be, and the color bleached from his face. But he was too desperate now to hesitate.

"We are not what we seem—" he began, then lifted the flute to his lips. Poitou and the guard reeled and clutched the window sill to keep from falling into the cavernous jaws of a lion, a beast three stories high, which yawned in their faces.

Maçon tucked the flute back in his belt and the lion vanished.

Poitou rubbed his eyes, glared

around, and turned to the guard. "Admit them!" he ordered. "The seigneur has need of magicians, since that cowardly Prelati fled from him. Myself will conduct them to Gilles!"

**P**OITOU seemed to be a person of some authority. He shunted Jeanne aside—civilly but firmly—into a hall where dispirited women with pale, worn faces toiled over needlework. He led Maçon down one flight of worn and moldy stairs after another. They at last crossed an antechamber toward an iron-bound oaken door black with age and foul with greasy and bloody finger marks around the latch.

Poitou flung open the door and a blaze of fire in great forges illuminated them.

And there, at the farther end, Maçon saw his son. Robert was sobbing hysterically and begging for mercy, kneeling on the floor, clothed only in a length of rope which noosed about his neck and hung down to a severed end. The other half of the rope dangled from a beam overhead.

And the creature to whom Robert made obeisance was a man, naked to the waist, clothed in white damask trousers, erect, proud, his face the color of snow and his lips bright red above a short beard so black it reflected the firelight in purple sheen—Bluebeard himself. His eyes were

blazing sapphires, watching the boy below him.

Bluebeard's voice was the croon of a mother soothing its child to sleep. "Quiet, quiet, my beauty," he was saying to Robert. "I but hanged you to test your courage! Did I not cut you down immediately you lost your senses?"

He drew Robert's head close and with the fingers of his left hand lifted the curls on the nape of the boy's neck. At the same time, Maçon saw him reach with the other hand for the heavy, curved knife that lay on a table.

But Bluebeard's brilliant eyes caught sight of Maçon and Poitou, and with a convulsive leap he flung Robert backward on the floor and whirled with an oath.

"Why am I disturbed?"

"Master," Poitou bowed low, but with—Maçon saw, in spite of his horror at the basilisk glare of Gilles—something of the familiarity and affrontery of a very privileged servant. "The matter would not wait, here is come the most puissant seer and enchanter we have ever encountered, even in dreams. The deed of sorcery he worked at the castle gate—"

GILLES came slowly around the end of the table. There was no mirth in his smile, Maçon noted, and he shuddered at the silky, serpentine touch as Gilles took his hand.

"A necromancer, I hope?" asked Bluebeard, jeweled eyeballs fixed unwinkingly on Maçon's. "If so, we will make trial this midnight, in the Black Tower above, in the room with four windows in the form of a cross. And for the sacrifice to those whose names must be mentioned only then," he turned and smiled gloatingly at Robert still huddled on the floor, "a gift acceptable. An innocent heart, torn from the living breast; eyes that never lusted, cut out amidst shrieks of the victim; a hand that has wrought no harm, severed while the blood runs quick."

"Devil!" croaked Maçon.

A flicker of interest and amusement thawed the frozen features of Bluebeard. "How did you guess it?" he asked curiously. "But I would have power over fellow devils—and to this end all my labors have turned these past four years."

A red tongue darted out and flicked over the ruby lips, and the serpentine eyes twitched sidewise toward his victim on the floor.

Serpentine! That was the word. Everything about the man, however human in form, was serpentine; the frozen face, the sudden snakelike movements, the slithering touch of his hand, the fixed, unwinking stare that charmed you toward his jaws.

Maçon lifted his flute and began

to play, the snake charmer's song of the Paynim.

Instantly Bluebeard was Beelzebub—huge, fanged, with forked tongue shooting out from scaly jaws, bat-winged, iron-crowned—his saurian body quivering and dancing and weaving to the power of the flute tune.

Poitou fled. Robert recovered, sat up, then crawled around the table and back of Maçon.

And Maçon played on, not daring to stop, and wondering what horrible fate would overtake him when he was too weary to blow into the mouthpiece.

But it was Beelzebub who sweated and tired first. "Let me go," he begged, and his voice was wheedling. "Let me go back to Limbo."

Maçon knew how they went to Limbo. He gestured to Robert to pick up a coil of rope—there was plenty of cordage for tying prisoners lying slovenly about the torture chamber. Robert obediently coiled the rope and flung it toward the high ceiling, where the end disappeared in smoke that had drifted there from the forge fires. The rope stood stiffly on end. Beelzebub leaped for it and began to climb, winding around and around it, snakelike as ever.

AS HE crawled out of sight, there rang through the chamber a series of hoots and honkings, a

grinding screech, and the smell of something burning, also some rattling and crashing, and voices.

"You blinking blind road hog, what d'ya mean by braking like that without sticking out your arm!"

"Who' yuh calling blind, huh? Don't you see this lousy big boa constrictor that crawled right in front of me, like to wrecked my car!"

And another voice, "Do tell! Ain't he a monster! Musta got away from Barnum & Bailey."

Maçon and Robert paid no attention to the hubbub of voices, which they couldn't understand anyway, for it was in a language foreign to them and dealt with things in which they wished no part. Their attention was fixed on Bluebeard, Gilles de Rais, sliding down the rope as the hole in the smoke cloud closed.

Maçon had continued tooting on the flute automatically until then, but he stopped now and the rope fell, though Gilles was close enough to the floor to land on his feet.

But it was a very different Bluebeard. He was dressed in a suit of faded blue canvas with a long number—Maçon couldn't read numbers higher than ten so he didn't know what it was—stamped on chest and back.

"Whew!" said Gilles in a friendly conversational tone. "They had



me working on a road gang—eleven months and twenty-nine days for vagrancy. If I hadn't seen the asphalt open up in a smoke cloud and something crawl through! Anyway, I dived right into it and grabbed the rope. Am I glad to be back!"

"From Limbo," said Maçon, who gathered nothing but the last words.

"Yes, I guess—wait, I'm still talking the way they do. Mc thinks they styled it a county jail, but employ what terminology you please."

Gilles looked around curiously, then with recollection.

"Why, this is my own torture chamber," he said. "I never used it, except for a couple of English spies, and it made me sick for weeks afterward whenever I thought of that. But somebody's been using it while I was away."

"Were you not here, just now?" Maçon asked.

"May I renounce God," and Gilles stopped to cross himself, "may I lose salvation and die if I speak not the truth, but I've been away four years. Ever since I was foolish enough to repeat that spell and call Beelzebub, and he tricked me into climbing a rope."

"Then, *Sieur*, it was not you but Beelzebub in your very own shape, blue beard and all, who has ravaged the countryside and

murdered these many children! But it is reputed against you."

"What? Now that would be just the trick of that lying demon," said Gilles. "Tell me all of the worst—"

THE door clanged and Poitou leaped inside. Gilles took an instant dislike to him and glared so sternly that the evil youth saw no change in his lord.

"Master," screamed Poitou. "Captain Jean Labbe of the Duke's bodyguard, and Robin Guillaumet, with his notary, the Bishop of Nantes, and a mighty force of soldiery are here to arrest you! It was the violation of the church at St. Etienne set them on. They speak of charging you with murder, torture, evil living, heresy! A hanging matter!"

"Heresy? I, Marshal of France and companion-in-arms of the saintly Jeanne d'Arc—heresy?" cried out Gilles. He rushed at Poitou and kicked him headlong out of the chamber.

"But Jeanne was burned for heresy," Maçon reminded him timidly.

"So she was," agreed Gilles, awe-stricken. "And it was my disillusion about the ways of the Church that led me to—ah, momentarily, I assure you—attempt magic. But enough of that!"

"Belike they wish to hang you for the crimes of Beelzebub," said

Maçon, who was beginning to like this hearty Bluebeard.

"Doubtless they do, but I know a trick," said Gilles. "Let Beelzebub dance to the tune he has composed here."

Gilles threw off his upper garment, and filled a brazier with coals from the fire. With a piece of charcoal he sketched the pentacle on the floor, stood over the brazier with a boot on each side of it, and began to roar in Latin shouting for Beelzebub.

Nothing happened.

"It worked the other time," said Gilles desperately, and began again.

Maçon had an inspiration. Gilles' reference to music had given him an idea. He played his flute again, and motioned to Robert to toss up the rope. And sure enough, no sooner did it hang from the smoke under the ceiling than Beelzebub cascaded down, bleeding, pummeled, bruised, but alive and wailing inside the pentagram.

"Mercy, freedom!" cried the devil as he again danced and writhed to the flute melody.

"Swear by Sathanus to take my form again and endure the penalty of the crimes you have done here in my name," demanded Gilles bitterly.

"I swear," said Beelzebub, and in a flicker, there were two Bluebeards, one inside and one outside of the pentagram.

THE real Gilles scuffed out the marking on the floor, and the false Bluebeard sank into a chair. As Gilles, Maçon and Robert hurried from the torture chamber, they heard a mocking laugh behind them.

"No devil could resist an attempt to swindle; he'll think of some dirty trick," said Gilles resignedly. "But now we must find some disguises, because I have a feeling my popularity isn't what it used to be."

A few notes on the flute by Maçon solved that problem. Enveloped in monastic habits, swinging censers to purify the foul palace of Machecoul, the three walked out and took Jeanne along with them.

In a similar disguise—but these outfits purchased in shops with money they'd obtained at Brieuze—they sat in the back row of the Bouffray audience hall, now a courtroom.

They saw the false Gilles dressed sacrilegiously in the white hood and cloak of a Carmelite. He was carrying a crucifix, pretending extraordinary contrition, and confessing loudly to the great assemblage a series of crimes of such horror and black-heartedness that the pens of the scribes faltered.

Meanwhile, the real Gilles astonished those nearest him by the curses that poured out of his

monkish hood as he listened to the honorable fame of a great noble of French eternally damned and blasted.

It was no real gain when Beelzebub, in the name of Gilles de Laval, Seigneur de Rais, Count of Brienne, Lord of Chantoce and Pouzages, was condemned to the stake and immediately hanged and burned along with Poitou and another of his sort. For, as Gilles pointed out, this only sent him back to Hell, which was his home anyway.

**E**VENTUALLY Maçon, Jeanne and Robert, accompanied by Gilles, got far enough away so they would not be recognized. The men were given work building brick walls by a lord to whom they made homage.

Gilles showed aptitude for the craft, and occasionally Maçon made a little extra money ridding some hen roost or dairy barn of a serpent.

Sometimes, when the story of Bluebeard was told at a village festival, Gilles would shake his head in wonder and say: "And I used to think that the greatest achievement of a man was to make himself remembered in ages to follow!"

*Ralph Spencer*

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# Sizzlestick

By SAM MERWIN, JR.

*As the most famous water-diviner, Chris was making a mint . . . which was all right with the law . . . but not with the Law of Wizardry!*



Illustrated by ASHMAN



CHRIS was not aware of the crowd of impatient, skeptical and, here and there, fanatical people that surrounded him at a discreet distance, until his communion with the soil beneath him ceased. He stepped back slowly, nodding to an official who placed a small red flag in the ground, where Chris' divided witch-hazel divining-rod had indicated water could be found.

It was hot. Feeling deflated, as usual, after a successful bit of divination, Chris mopped his streaming brow with an already sodden handkerchief. It must be close to 100° Fahrenheit in the shade, he thought. And he was standing in the sun, had been following his dowzing rod around in it for the better part of an hour.

Where concentration had made him impervious to distraction, let-down brought hypersensitivity. He heard the hum of the movie cameras, the harsher, more distant drone of a helicopter overhead and, above all, the voices.

This was Christopher Stone's 500th successful dowze and, as such, was rated an event of national importance. Thanks largely, he thought, to Merton Keene.

UNTIL the famous author had "discovered" him, some thirteen months earlier, Chris had taken his water-divining ability more or less for granted. In the

small New England community where he had been born and bred and which he still called home, Chris' talent had been rated about on a par with Anna Grey's flair for reading palms, or Johnny Judson's double-jointedness.

More useful and, of course, considerably more profitable. But scarcely more remarkable.

Then Merton Keene, a renowned novelist and magazine journalist, had, after decades of high excitement and equally high prosperity in the world of letters, decided to return to his native heath, there to renew the roots from which he, like Chris, had sprung.

The town water system had proved unable to supply sufficient pressure necessary to operate the sprinkler system Keene had installed to maintain the greenness of the lawns of his estate. So, in more or less routine fashion, Chris had been summoned to locate a non-piped source of water that would do the trick.

Merton Keene, vehemently shaking his leonine yellow-white shock of hair in protest, talking with blistering vehemence of "witchcraft" and "ignorant superstition," had dogged Chris' heels while he paced the sward and located not one but three wholly accessible underground springs which were promptly brought in.

From then on, Chris' life had no longer been his own. First, in

the rising tide of publicity, had come the series of articles in a famous national magazine. Then had come a spectacular series of public test dowzes, staged not only to promote Christopher Stone, master dowzer, but to justify Merton Keene in the face of scientific Doubting Thomases and professional skeptics.

"I'm beginning to feel like a trained bear," Chris had remarked to his entrepreneur at this point.

"Son—" Merton Keene had placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder—"you've got to think of this in the light of the good it's going to do to have people believe in dowzing. It's important work."

"Yeah," Chris had agreed doubtfully, "but it's raising the dickens with my own farming schedule."

Keene, of course, had quelled his mild rebellion with a tidal wave of talk and, the following month, the publicity had increased. Newsreels, television appearances and then a book, made up of Keene's magazine articles, had been selected by a reader's club with hundreds of thousands of members.

CHRIS STONE, dowzer, had found himself a national figure—a fact he realized with more distaste than usual—on this, the conclusion of his 500th successful dowze, here on the outskirts of a drought-ridden southwestern city.

All at once, he felt a long way from home.

He looked for Merton Keene, seeking someone from home in this horde of strangers. But the author, busily engaged in conversation with a short man wearing dark glasses and a loud sports jacket, failed to heed Chris' silent appeal. Chris looked for the less imposing but far more attractive person of Betsy Wayland, Keene's secretary, who was busily feeding information to a group of newspapermen alongside the newsreel truck.

He said, "To hell with all this!" stuck his dowzing rod through his belt and made his way slowly toward the highway at the edge of the field where he found a taxicab.

**J**UST as the driver put his cab into gear, a little man, waving frantically, ran up calling, "Mr. Stone—just a moment!"

Ordinarily courteous, Chris was in no mood to sign any more autograph pads. He said, "Get going," to the driver, gave his hotel and address, and the cab pulled away, leaving the hot little man standing disconsolately in the roadway. Feeling more depressed, Chris wondered if being a celebrity hadn't turned him into a heel. He thought longingly of the rich loam of his northeast meadow, and the clear, cool pond at its foot.

Being a boon to humanity had its problems.

In the trim, mercifully air-conditioned anonymity of his hotel room, Chris called room service and ordered a pitcher of beer. Slowly, lest he rip sweat-sodden fabric, he got out of his jacket, hung it up to dry. He was unfastening his tie when he heard the rap on the door. The man with the beer was prompt, he thought gratefully, as he called, "Come on in—the door's unlocked."

It was not the waiter who entered, however—it was the hot little man he had left in the middle of the road.

There was something vaguely foreign about him. It was evident in the too-precise cut of his limp garments, in the slight ceremonious bob of his head, in his accent as he said, "Mr. Stone?"

"That's right," said Chris, stifling a desire to tell the intruder to scram.

"I am Leon Choremi," the stranger said, bowing again. "I tried to talk to you back there." With a slight jerk of his head in the direction from which he had come. "You know me?"

Chris frowned, then blinked. "Mr. Choremi! I thought you were in New York. I'm sorry about running away. But, you see, I thought . . ."

"I understand," said Mr. Choremi.

**T**HERE was another knock on the door, and this time it was the man with the beer. Chris tipped him, got rid of him, then poured a pair of foaming glasses. "Hotter than hell out there today," he said.

Choremi accepted his drink doubtfully. "The purpose of my visit is not entirely social."

Chris sat on the bed and said, "I could do with an unkind word. Seems like lately I've been smothered in soft soap."

"You have done remarkably well," said Mr. Choremi. Then, ominously, "Perhaps a little too well. You know who I am?"

Chris nodded. Choremi was field secretary of the North American division of that ancient and very anonymous organization known to its few initiates as the Diviner's Association. Barely 16 when his proven feats of dowzing had brought him to the attention of this virtually unknown group, Chris had been sending a traditional tithe of his earnings to Association headquarters in Manhattan.

Of late, his contributions had become quite sizable. It occurred to him that the non-social purpose of Mr. Choremi's visit was to ask for an extra donation. He suggested as much to his guest.

Mr. Choremi shook dandruff-gray hair. "I wish it were merely that. No, Mr. Stone, I have come

here to insist that you cease all divining to which the slightest degree of publicity is attached."

Chris said, "Huh?" Then he added, "I'd like nothing better, Mr. Choremi. This publicity has raised hob with my real work. My fields are lying fallow, and I haven't gone fishing in six months. But—" he shrugged—"you tell me how to shut it off, and I'll do it."

"I'm afraid," Mr. Choremi leaned forward earnestly, "there's but one way. You'll have to retire for a time."

"I couldn't if I wanted to," said Chris bluntly. "I couldn't renege on Mr. Keene for one thing. And even if I did, I couldn't stop the reporters and cameramen from following me around."

Mr. Choremi looked regretful. He repeated, "There is but a single path open—retirement until you are no longer news."

"But *why*?" Chris exploded. "I haven't been doing this for myself—even if I have made dough out it. I'm doing it because Mr. Keene has showed me how much good dowzing can do if a lot of people believe in it, instead of just a few. I've never in my life asked for payment. And out of what people have given me, I've always paid you and your Association my ten per cent. Now you want me to stop, just when things are going good. *Why*?"

"Mr. Stone." The gray-haired



man's voice was stern. "It is a pity that so few members of our Association are acquainted with its traditions and ethics. As it is, all I can tell you is that the Association is unalterably opposed to publicity in any form."

"Ethics?" Chris was honestly startled. "What's ethically sour about wanting to help people and the land they live on? You'd think we were a bunch of doctors or something."

"Mist-er Stone!" The words were a reproof. "We are far more ancient than any medical association—or than the Hippocratic Oath itself. According to our records, medical ethics derive directly from ours. An old proverb says, 'Man needed wells ere he needed to get well.' A crude translation from the Hittite."

CHRIS controlled his temper with difficulty. "Dammit!" he exclaimed. "This is a free country. If I want to keep on helping folks with my dowzing rod, you have no right to stop me."

Mr. Choremi rose stiffly. "I regret your intransigency, Stone. I may or may not have the *right* to stop your dowzing. But I have the *power* to stop it. In gaining this power, years ago, I sacrificed my own divining abilities. And, from personal experience, I can assure you that a dowzer without his gift is like an ordinary man with a leg

cut off. I made the sacrifice voluntarily, and my work with the Association has been compensation. But you . . ."

He shook his head and departed. Chris sat down and scratched the back of his head. More than ever, he wished he were back on his own acres, minding his own business. He decided to take a shower.

He had barely emerged, wearing a toweling robe, when Merton Keene pushed open the door of his room without knocking and strode in, followed by Betsy Wayland.

Looking at her pert, inquisitive face, half-hidden by harlequin glasses, her reddish-brown hair in its pert Italian shingle, her equally pert figure, Chris wondered, not for the first time, if Betsy weren't the real reason for his letting himself be exploited by her employer. If she was, she was a good reason as well.

Author and secretary were aquiver with suppressed excitement. Mopping his brow, Merton Keene flung his rumpled, seersucker bulk into the room's one armchair. Betsy, who could probably manage, Chris thought, to look crisp and cool in an open-hearth furnace, sat more gracefully on the straight chair Mr. Choremi had just vacated.

"What's the idea of running out on me, boy?" Keene asked. With-

out waiting for an answer, he continued, "A lot of people wanted to meet you. You did great, boy, just great. Big things are stirring—big things."

"I wanted to be alone a little," said Chris, wondering why the author always made him feel apologetic.

"It's all right, boy," said Keene. "After all, you do the job. We merely bask in your glory. But we've got a real whopper coming up—the biggest yet. Mark Verney's manager was out there this afternoon. You know who Mark Verney is, son—of course you do. Everybody does."

**M**ERTON KEENE helped himself to a glass of the now-flat beer, gave Chris barely a chance to nod before resuming. "Biggest thing in Hollywood since Disney. You know—began a whole new cartoon cycle with his Harold O'Bang-Bang series . . ."

"Carol O'Boom-Boom," put in Betsy, with an adorable trace of Southern accent. .

"Carol O'Boom-Boom," the author went on as if she had not interrupted. "Made that big nature film, *Sleepy Stream*, last year . . ."

"*Lazy River*," Betsy said quietly.

"*Lazy River*," Merton Keene repeated. "Now he wants to shoot you doing your stuff to save some drought-afflicted country—farm-

land and a polo field for contrast . . ."

"Golf course," Betsy corrected.

"Golf course," the author agreed. "Wants to show the land dying, the people dying with it. Then you come in and bring them water. Verney wants to use a slow-motion process so the audience can watch the land make its comeback. Greatest thing ever, for dowzing. How does it sound to you?"

"Sounds fine," said Chris, thinking uncomfortably of Choremi.

"Something wrong, son? You don't seem enthusiastic," said the author, peering at his protege. "Remember, we set out to put dowzing on the map, and we're doing it. This ought to win more converts than all the stories I've written, laid end to end."

"Chris looks tired," said Betsy swiftly. Her smile of sympathy sent laggard blood racing through his arteries.

"Heck, it's not that," he told them. He went on to explain about Mr. Choremi and his covert threat.

Merton Keene roared with laughter. He said, shaking his head so tears flew from his eyes, "You mustn't let crackpots bother you, boy. How can anybody stop you from dowzing?"

Betsy said thoughtfully, "When I was doing research for the stories, boss, there was something . . ." She frowned and shook her softly shingled head. "It seemed

sort of crazy. And we were laying off the witchcraft angles, so I didn't pay too much attention."

"Quite right, young lady." The author rose. "Don't give it another thought, boy. Well, we've got to change and meet Verney's nian Morris downstairs for dinner."

"Norris," said Betsy.

"Norris." Keene laid a moist hand on Chris' shoulder. "Remember, boy, this is the big one. We mustn't let it get away."

"Wear your new suit," Betsy told him. "You want to look nice."

WHEN they had gone, Chris wondered what it was about Hollywood that put all human beings, feminine gender, into a tailspin. Opening his closet door, he looked longingly at a comfortable pair of gabardine slacks that hung in creaseless comfort, then sighed and removed the blue Palm Beach from its hanger.

The deal with Mr. Norris was consummated over consomme in the hotel dining room—the rest of the meal being devoted to the ironing out of details. Afterward, Merton Keene was carried off by a small tidal wave of feminine admirers in somebody's Cadillac. Betsy and Chris walked to a near-by movie.

"Aren't you afraid to let the boss go off alone?" he asked her, as they strolled back to the hotel. "He might get things all mixed up

without you on hand to correct him."

"He doesn't get mixed up exactly," she said. "It's just that his mind works in so many directions at once, he never gets any one little old thing quite right. He needs someone to do his checking-up for him, as well as his research—and that someone happens to be me."

"Golly, you know a lot of things," said Chris admiringly. He grabbed her and kissed her right there on the sidewalk.

She pulled away indignantly, but not quite soon enough to make it a rebuff. Later, he hummed his way back to his room, humming the air to an old Franky Laine record. Maybe it wasn't much, but at least the ice was broken.

The week that followed held a dreamlike unreality for Chris. He let a rising tide of events carry him from place to place, from conference to conference, letting Merton Keene pilot the boat. The only realities were the few times Betsy was alone with him. His progress was not spectacular, but it was steady.

Thus, on the evening of August 14th, Chris found himself alone in a Hollywood hotel bungalow, waiting for her to return from a picture conference and pick him up. Tentatively, he was planning to take her somewhere quiet, for a bite of supper. He was pleasantly aglow at the prospect, envisioning

her clad in dungarees and a gay cotton shirt, pruning the elderberry bushes in the side lot at home.

Someone knocked, and Chris called, "Come on in, darling."

IT was Mr. Choremi, looking more apologetic and determined than before. He said, "I hope it is not too late, Mr. Stone."

"Too late for what?" Chris countered emptily. He had all but forgotten the field secretary's previous visit in the press of recent events and emotional excitements.

"Too late for you to withdraw from this projected cinematic performance," Choremi said solemnly. Then with reproach, "I never thought my previous warning would prove insufficient. As it is, I've had to fly out here from New York. And I get awfully airsick."

"Sorry," Chris said politely, wishing Choremi would go away. He added, recalling the earlier conversation, "I'm afraid it is too late. I can hardly withdraw now."

"In that case," said the visitor firmly, "I fear the Association will have to take steps to stop you. Dowzing ethics simply will not permit such vulgar popularization."

"For Pete's sake!" said Chris. "You must be crazy. We dowzers have an authentic talent and authentic usefulness. Our whole trouble is *lack* of publicity." Chris realized he was paraphrasing Merton Keene. "Maybe, with publicity,

the dowzers who are masquerading as geologists to win respect can come out in the open."

"Such masquerades are entirely proper," said Mr. Choremi. "They enable dowzers to place their talents at the disposal of society without violation of the privacy ethics. Ethics you must respect, Stone, or you'll be read out of the Association."

"Read me out then," said Chris defiantly. "After all, the Association has taken a lot of money from me—and, I might add, done nothing for me."

"Unfortunately, it's not that simple," said the odd little man. "Dowzing outside of the Association is not permitted. So, if you persist, we shall have to make sure you never dowze again."

"How are you going to do that?"

"Rest assured, we can," was the ominous reply. "Well, if you change your mind before shooting time tomorrow, call me at this number." He thrust a card into Chris' hand, bowed crisply and withdrew.

Chris stuffed it away in his wallet and tried to forget about the whole affair. Betsy failed to appear for their date. She was probably, he thought with gloom, abetting her boss while he addressed a hall full of heavily corseted middle-aged women in some Santa Monica auditorium. The picture made him thoroughly unhappy.

A STUDIO car picked him up early the next morning and drove him to the location site, some forty miles northeast of the city. Chris had already been over the ground and had located a number of potential water sources which should help to restore its parched surfaces—both to golf links and adjoining farmlands.

On this first day of actual shooting, his job was to locate water beneath the golf course, whose well-groomed acres had been burned to a dead-lettuce brown by the hot August sun. Holding his witch-hazel rod clasped firmly against his diaphragm, Chris went through his paces as the director ordered.

Even under such artificial conditions, he felt the remembered thrill of communion with the earth under him, the pulsing of the unlisted sense that enabled him to "feel" its subterranean formation, the response to the tug of the wand in his hands, as he neared the places he sought, where water lay hidden, waiting to be tapped.

"You sure you've got it made, boy?" Merton Keene asked him, sotto voce, when this part of the job was completed.

Chris nodded, then asked, "Where's Betsy?"

The author blinked and looked vaguely surprised. "Odd," he said. "Haven't laid eyes on her since yesterday afternoon." He frowned

as if trying to recall something, then shrugged. "Don't fret, boy—whatever she's doing, she's got good reason for it. Never met a girl half as good. Hate the thought of losing her."

"Losing her?" Chris was startled.

"Certainly." Keene's grin was warm and knowing. "You two didn't think you could hide it from me, did you?" He chuckled, gave Chris' shoulder a squeeze. "Do it myself if I were younger and wiser. Don't worry, boy—I won't stand in your way. Lucky devil."

"Thanks, Mr. Keene," said Chris, aglow in the older man's warmth. "But I'd give a lot to know where she is, just the same."

"She'll show up, never fear," was the vaguely reassuring reply. And Chris had to be satisfied with it.

He didn't even wait to see the results of his dowze that afternoon. Instead, he returned to the hotel and went directly to Betsy's bungalow. The door was unlocked, and the place was a mess. Clothing lay tossed around on the bed, on chairs, even on the floor. Familiar with Betsy's unerring neatness, Chris felt a knot of worry explode into something like panic.

Something very evidently had happened to Betsy. Sick to his stomach, Chris walked back to his own bungalow, wondering what to do. His first impulse was to call

the police. His second was to wait a little longer. After all, police intervention might cause her embarrassment, even danger. He sat down and put his head in his hands.

THE telephone rang. It was Mr. Choremi. Chris barely paid attention to the little man who said, "I regret that you've seen fit to go ahead with this, Stone. I thought the steps already taken would deter you. From now on, you'll be able to dowze water, only if you *don't* think of Noah's Ark while doing so. Only if you *don't* think of Noah's Ark."

"Oh, shut up!" Chris barked and hung up. *Noah's Ark*. Now the thought of a bunch of animal crackers was supposed to stop him from dowzing. He decided Choremi was crazy.

The phone rang again. This time it was the assistant director. He said, "Sorry, Chris, but we're going to have to do today's shooting over again. The boss decided your Number-Two water-site would be more effective on three-D. Just wanted to let you know."

"You're welcome," Chris said numbly.

A phrase uttered by Mr. Choremi was troubling him. "... steps already taken would deter you." Chris dived for the phone again, dug out the card Choremi had given him, dialed the number. He

was suddenly filled with cold rage, rather than fear. Choremi, by his own indirect admission, offered the only explanation for Betsy's disappearance.

"Listen, you," he said, when the little man's voice came on. "If you don't return Betsy Wayland safe and sound, I'm going to the papers with the whole story of the Diviners' Association, and charge you and the Association with coercion through kidnaping. I don't give a damn what you do to me, but you can't hurt my girl, hear?"

"What?" Choremi cried. "But you can't do that! Why, you'd destroy the very foundations of the Association, and without a—"

"That's the idea," Chris told him grimly. "Get Betsy Wayland back here, or else."

"But—but it may take time to—" Choremi protested.

"If she isn't here after tomorrow's shooting, I talk," Chris warned. "What's more, I'll get Merton Keene to make it sound better."

He slammed down the phone, his rage evaporating. What, he thought, if his threat caused whoever was holding Betsy to . . . whatever things a ruthless kidnaper could do to a girl like Betsy, and icy chills tap-danced up and down his spine.

But he seemed to have scared Choremi. He hoped against hope his call would do the trick. Then he settled down for a sleepless

night. He didn't even dare ask Merton Keene for advice. There was no telling how the volatile author would react.

**T**HE next day was sunny, but not for Chris. Somehow, by forcing himself not to think about Betsy, he managed to bring in the second spring as requested by the director. It grew increasingly difficult for him not to give the whole show away to Merton Keene. The author seemed more cheerful than ever.

For the first time in their association, Chris found himself actively disliking the white-haired author. How, he wondered, could any man remain so unconcerned while Betsy's very life might be hanging in the balance? True, Keene might not know she had been kidnaped—but at least he ought to show some signs of worry over her disappearance.

Chris was careful not to mention Betsy's name all day.

When he finally got back to his bungalow, a slip under the door requested that he call a certain Los Angeles number. He did so, heart in mouth, and soon found himself talking to a petulant Mr. Choremi, who said, "Well, I finally ran your Miss Wayland to earth, but it took some doing. Now, she won't even let me see her."

"She won't let you see her?" Chris asked, bewildered. "What in

Sam Hill's going on? Where is she?"

"In the hotel where I'm waiting," was Choremi's reply. "She refuses to talk to anyone. I don't understand why you asked me to—"

"Stay right where you are," Chris told him, hanging up and dashing out of the bungalow to hail a cab.

Mr. Choremi was as annoyed as his telephone conversation had suggested. He greeted Chris with a withering, "I never thought a dower would stoop to such crude blackmail as a false kidnaping accusation."

"But . . ." Chris stammered. "But didn't *you* have her kidnaped?"

"My dear Stone!" the field secretary replied haughtily.

When Betsy's room telephone finally answered, after repeated ringing from the desk, a strange, muffled voice said, "Who is id? I'b nod id do adyone."

"Betsy, it's me—Chris! Are you okay?"

"Go 'way—I'b aw righ," came the reply.

"I'm coming up," he told her. "You don't *sound* all right to me. I've got to be sure."

"If you do," she countered thickly, "I'll dever speag do you agaid. Id's hay fever dime, and I can'd show by face for three days. I lefd a dote, exblainig. I ea'd go







around Hollywood the way I ab. Didn'd you ged my message?"

"Message?" said Chris, bewildered. "Are you *sure* you're okay?" He recalled suddenly that yesterday had been August 15th, traditional inauguration day for hay fever sufferers. All at once, he felt an utter idiot. He said, "Isn't there something I can do, honey?"

"Leeb be alode undil by shods dague effegd, Gris," was the reply. "I'll be bag domorrow nighd."

**O**VERWHELMED with a boulder of emotions that combined relief with a fervent desire to walk upright under the lobby carpet, Chris hung up and turned sheepishly to Mr. Choremi, saying, "I'm sorry as all heck, Mr. Choremi. I guess things got a little bit mixed up. But when I heard you talking about steps already taken the other night, I thought it meant you'd kidnaped Betsy."

Choremi also was obviously in the throes of inward struggle. He said finally, "I am sorry too, Mr. Stone, believe me — although I'm glad to have relieved you of this anxiety. I can assure you that the powers I possess need no such crude methods as you seem to have suspected. As you doubtless discovered today for yourself."

"Your crazy hex didn't work," said Chris, remembering. "I brought in a perfectly good spring for Mr. Verney this afternoon."

"You *what?*" Mr. Choremi sat down very suddenly on a sofa that was fortuitously handy. "You dowzed today—*successfully?*"

"Sure," said Chris. "I didn't think of Noah's Ark once. Heck, I couldn't think of anything but Betsy."

"Oh!" Mr. Choremi's voice sounded small and distant. "I think I understand. For a moment, I had hoped—had hoped for myself, too." He shook his head and sighed. "Tomorrow, I fear, will be different."

"We'll see," Chris said casually. "I've got a cab waiting outside. Can I take you somewhere?"

"No, thank you," said Choremi. "I think I'll walk home alone. This has been a very trying day for me. *Very* trying."

Chris slept soundly that night. He considered sending Betsy flowers, decided against doing so, lest they aggravate her allergy. Poor, sweet kid, he thought. And just when she had wanted to look her best for the movie people. He wondered again the odd effect Hollywood had on women, as he dropped off.

The next day was hot. Chris dowzed on the farmland adjoining the golf course, working with the quiet assurance a lifetime record of 502 successful dowzings had imparted.

He and Merton Keene and Mark Verney were enjoying a cigarette

in the skimpy shade of one of the farm outbuildings, late in the afternoon, when a worried assistant director reported and said, "Hate to bother you, gentlemen, but this last well seems to be bringing in salt water."

"Salt water?" Chris was incredulous. He went back, step by step, over his dowze. It had been perfectly correct, he was certain. He even remembered, just as he felt the tug of the rod in his fists, that he'd been thinking about the fiasco of the night before, when he had explained to Mr. Choremi that his Noah's Ark hex had failed.

*Noah's Ark!* He had thought about it—and he *had* brought in a worthless spring!

He picked up the divining rod, which lay against the wall behind him, and said, "I'd like to try it again."

He made another dowze—and the more he tried not to think of Noah's Ark, the more he thought about Noah's Ark. Once again, he located a spring that was salt.

**D**RIVING back to the hotel through the twilight, Merton Keene said, "Never mind, boy. Probably what's wrong with that old farm, anyway. Built over a salt lick or something. Don't let it phase you."

"I wish to heck it were," said Chris miserably. "There's more to it than that."

"What's the point, son?" the author asked. "What's up?"

Chris gave him a play-by-play account of what had happened in the forty-eight hours just past. Merton Keene listened to him all the way through, not interrupting until Chris mentioned Betsy's claiming to having left an explanatory note.

"That's right," said the author. "I found it yesterday. Must have stuck it away and forgot it. You didn't mention being worried, so I didn't mention finding it. Sorry, son. Now, you say this Choremi chap put a hex on your dowzing?"

"Yeah," said Chris. "He sure did. The worst part is, I'll never make another dowze without thinking of Noah's Ark. What gets me is why Noah's Ark should have such an effect."

"Simple, son," said the author. "Did flocks of research for those pieces on you. Dowzing goes way back, you know—way back. Seems there's a claim it was a dowzer rebellion that brought on the Flood. And it was a salt-water flood. Noah's Ark has been a penalty for out-of-line dowzers ever since." He paused, then added, "Odd—never occurred to me it'd still be operating. Don't ask me how it works. Didn't believe it did, as a matter of fact. Sorry, son. 'There are stranger things, under heaven and earth, Laertes . . .'"

"Horatio," said Chris automati-

cally. "It's okay for you to be sorry, Mr. Keene. But what about me? I'm done as a dowzer unless somebody kidnaps Betsy every time I try it."

"Don't you believe it, son," came the reassuring response. "Know a thing or three this Carino chap never heard of—lay odds on it. Well, here we are. A good dinner, and we'll eat it."

To Chris, his martini tasted salty—even without an olive. But somehow he got through the meal. Afterward, they adjourned to the author's bungalow, while Keene looked vainly for some missing notes. A search of Betsy's bungalow was equally unrewarding.

Finally, the author said, "Devil with 'em! Distrust notes anyway. Got a photographic memory—total recall. One of the secrets of my success, son. Now, let's see . . ."

**I**N the course of the next two hours, Chris heard things about the history and practice of dowzing that he had never before suspected. About how the Ancient Sumerians of Chaldee used dowzers to fertilize the Mesopotamian desert, how the Egyptians depended on dowzing for the **very** existence of their great empire in years when the Nile failed to flood. He heard of more ancient empires, in the prehistory of what is now the Sahara Desert, of the uses of **dowz**-ing in Ancient China, in Babylonia,

in Assyria, in Crete, in Greece, in Etruria and in Rome.

He learned how, in olden times, a favored ruler was able to use a hex to weaken the dowzers of his enemies, rendering them helpless, of how, in times of war, dowzers were employed to flood vast lowland expanses, either for attack or defense. He learned that, in ancient times, for each dowzing hex, there was a counter-hex.

"What gets me," said Chris, fascinated, but puzzled as to how he could apply this plethora of knowledge to his own problem, "is why a hex like this should work on me. I thought a man had to be a believer before any magic worked."

"Deep down, son, we're all believers," the author told him. "That's the devilish cleverness of it. As to *how* it works, I dunno. But there are whole tomes of law outside of Blackstone — yes, and outside Newton and Einstein too. Let's see now . . . each counter-hex was the diametric opposite of the original. So, what's the opposite of water, son?"

"Fire, I suppose," Chris said doubtfully.

"Fire . . . fire . . ." The author's broad, lumpy forehead wrinkled in thought. "I *have* it! What was the greatest holocaust of ancient times, son? Vesuvius, right? I can see Betsy's notes as if they were in front of me right now. What you've got to do, son, is not only *not*

think of Noah's Ark, but *not* think of Pompeii, as well. Got it?"

"I—I guess I can remember that," said Chris unhappily. "Not only *not* think of Noah's Ark, but *not* think of Pompeii, as well. You really believe it'll work?"

"Hex worked, didn't it?" Mer-ton Keene asked. "Don't worry, son. If it doesn't, we'll try another. Chap Carlino, or whatever he calls himself, can't do this to us. Not on your life, son!"

CHRIS looked uncertainly at the author the next morning, when it was time for him to begin dowzing for the cameras again. He received a confident smile, an encouraging nod of the leonine head. He managed an answering smile of sorts and got on with the job. He wished Betsy were there. But she was still incommunicado.

He put his mind on his work, walking slowly, carefully, over the baked fairway. He had located probable water sources in pre-hex dry runs, but there was still the old familiar tingling excitement, the feel, through the rod, of being one with the earth. He grew oblivious to the bustle of film-making that surrounded him.

Then, the animated animal crackers began their march, two by two, into the familiar red-roofed Ark. As they did so, he felt the tug of the rod away from his breast. Desperately, he tried not

to think of Pompeii being overwhelmed by the great eruption of 79 A.D. And, for an instant, the animal crackers seemed to be marching into the flaming crater of Vesuvius, rather than into the Ark.

The rod tugged again, more strongly, almost as if it had life of its own. Vaguely, Chris became aware that he was being pulled off the pre-arranged course. But, for the moment, the witch-hazel wand was his master. It pulled him up a hillock and into a large, deep sand-trap, where it all but pulled free of his grasp.

"Try here!" he told the puzzled director.

"You're off course, Chris," the director replied. "The reflectors are set up on the other side, where you told us to—"

"I know," said Chris. "But dig right here. If it's difficult, use a small blasting charge. You'll bring in a whopper."

A sub-surface layer of rock impeded the drilling, and it was finally decided to blast. Some two hours after Chris had finished his dowze, a small charge of TNT was detonated. What happened thereafter made movie, dowzing and geological history.

**T**HE first sign of anything out of the ordinary came when, as the explosion subsided, a plume of mustard-yellow smoke shot up to

a height of some fifty feet. The ground rumbled and shook, and the onlookers fell back in mild alarm—just in time, as it happened, for the next occurrence was a burst of smoking hot dirt and rocks, which rose lazily and fell to earth around the hole made by the blast, all but filling the sand-trap.

"Good God!" cried Mark Verney. "What's happening?"

"It looks like I brought in Vesuvius," said Chris. And, even as he spoke, another plume of yellow smoke rose, this time to a good hundred feet, spraying hot minerals over the lip of the trap. Chris turned to a suddenly pale Merton Keene and said, "You're *sure* you remembered the right counter-hex?"

"My memory is photographic—100 per cent accurate," said the novelist confidently. But his forehead was beaded with sweat.

More hot dirt and rocks came bubbling up and the ground rumbled and shook more violently. Mark Verney, his eyes blazing, said to Chris, "Young man, if this isn't rectified pronto, you've cost me a cool half million buckaroos."

And all Chris could say was, "Golly, I'm sorry."

That he drop dead on the spot was the least of the suggestions which were hurled at him during the hour that followed—while the erstwhile sand-trap belched and

roared and poured about itself the beginnings of a respectable volcano.

Tail between his legs, Chris fled to the hotel and entered his bungalow to find a slightly red-nosed, but otherwise restored Betsy awaiting him.

She took one look at him, gathered him into her slim, competent arms and said, "What's happened, honey—what's wrong?"

He told her in detail, and she sighed and said, "Oh, dear! And I *would* have to come down with that old hay fever, right when you needed me most. If Merton had only held his hosses . . ."

"Why? What did he do wrong?" Chris wanted to know.

"He forgot about the original hex making the water salt," she said, shaking her pretty head. "I learned the whole business while I was doing research on the magazine pieces. It was on some of those Hittite inscriptions the archeologists are just beginning to get deciphered. Poor Chris!"

"Poor Chris," said Chris and kissed her.

"**N**OW listen," said Betsy. "We've got to work this out right. First, though, I *do* want to thank you for coming to my rescue so gallantly, even if I wasn't the least bit kidnaped. But we've got to get back to these hexes . . ."

"The Pompeii counter-hex would





have been just fine, if you'd merely been bringing in dry wells, but it won't work against salt water. For that, you need a saltless analogy—the ancients used black basalt—but I guess the idea of coal, deep in the earth, would do it. Coal, or basalt, sops up the salt so the water stays pure."

Chris shook his head mournfully. "You mean," he said, "I've got to not think of Noah's Ark *and* Pompeii *and* coal or black basalt, the next time I dowze?" There was despair in his voice.

"Oh, no, honey, that would be awful!" There was no doubting Betsy's blazing intensity. Then, her eyes crinkling delightfully, she added, "You know, Chris, I never really believed any of this while I was studying up on it. You mean it all really happened?"

"It happened, all right," he told her. "Turn on the TV if you don't believe me. I must have set back dowzing two thousand years."

"Nonsense," she replied crisply. "Honey, you've got to *not* think of something that will put out the fire—coal or basalt would just make it worse. The Hittites had something. Oh, dear, I wish I had my notes handy. But I think I remember . . . I *do*! It was dirt, plain old ordinary dirt, to stifle the flames. They put out more volcanoes that way!"

"I've got not to think of Noah's Ark *and* Pompeii *and* dirt and not *not* think of coal or black basalt?"

he asked in total confusion.

"You've got to stop dowzing," said a hatefully familiar voice. "You may put the whole Diviner's Association out of business if you don't, young man."

"How did you get in here?" Chris asked, staring at Mr. Choremi.

"My apologies." The stiff bob of the head. "The door was unlocked, and my mission is urgent. Don't say I didn't warn you, young man. I was watching today, through field glasses. Do you know that lava has already begun to flow?"

"Holy smoke!" said Chris. Then, angrily, "If you'd kept your long nose out of my business, none of this would have happened."

"And if you hadn't violated the dowzer's code, none of this would have happened," Choremi replied. "I was merely doing my duty."

"I don't believe I've met this gentleman officially," said Betsy sweetly, "though we *did* talk over the hotel phone."

When the introductions had been properly performed, Chris turned to Betsy and said, "Well, what the heck am I going to do?"

"You're going right back out there and put that old volcano out," said Betsy decisively.

**A**LREADY, when they returned to the scene of the crime, a sizable hill covered the area around the sand-trap, a hill that was grow-



ing with each flaming burst of hot rock and lava. Around them, in the uneven, flickering, eerie light, was a scene of pandemonium—or a Dore illustration for Dante's *Inferno*.

Unnoticed in the uproar, Chris got out his rod and, with Betsy and Mr. Choremi trailing him, moved slowly toward the eruption he had unleashed that afternoon. He was faithfully trying not to think of all the things he was supposed not to think of when someone yelled and darted toward him and grabbed his arm.

It was Mark Verney. He said, "What're you trying to do now, Chris?"

"Put the darned thing out," Chris told him, his concentration shattered by the interruption. As he spoke, a series of fireballs, like those of a Roman candle on a vastly greater scale, rose slowly from the growing hilltop, with booming noises, and soared high in the night sky before returning to earth.

"Don't you dare!" shouted the producer. "This is the biggest thing since the crucifixion—a chance to photograph the birth of a volcano in technicolor! And it's mine, all mine—a gold mine!"

**L**ATER, when clear of the heart of the uproar, Verney said, "You can thank Merton Keene for suggesting the idea. I admit, I was slow on the pickup at first.

What a picture you've given me, young man. And when I'm done, I can rent the volcano out to every other studio!"

His eyes glowed a visual echo to the fire from the earth. Then, in lower pitch, he said, "There's just one small favor I'd like to ask of you, Chris. I'm sure Merton won't mind. But, if you could bring in another on the farmland you've dowzed, I could get really set for some birth-shots tomorrow. Think you can do it, Chris?"

"If it's okay with Mr. Keene," said Chris, "I don't see why not."

There was a strangled, squawking sound, as Mr. Choremi's eyes rolled upward and he collapsed on the hard earth in a dead faint.

"It's all right with me, son," said the author, when the proposition was presented to him. "Just don't blow up California, that's all. The atomic boys at Los Alamos are waiting for a crack at that."

The following afternoon, with movie and television cameras doing their stuff, Chris did his—and brought in a second small Vesuvius.

Watching it grow, under the shadow of the plume of smoke cast by the earlier eruption, less than half a mile away, Merton Keene said, "Son, we've never had a contract, but we're going to need one now. You've no idea of the offers pouring in. You can become a rich man in six months, just bringing

in volcanoes. Communities in cold climates, resort towns, other movie companies . . . You wouldn't think so, but everybody wants a volcano."

"You figure it out," said Chris, squeezing Betsy's arm, linked inside his own. "There's one little experiment I want to try."

"Go to it, son," said the novelist. "I'll hold the dogs at bay. Just don't forget you're famous."

**I**n a studio car, Chris and Betsy drove a couple of miles from the newly activated scene of volcanic activity. Then, dowsing rod in hand, Chris walked slowly across a sun-baked meadow, carefully *not* thinking of Noah's Ark and Pompeii and dirt—and *not* thinking of coal or black basalt.

After a while, he felt again the tug of the rod against his hands. He moved this way, and lost it, that way, and felt it grow stronger still. A little later, satisfied, he said to Betsy, "Fetch me the spade, dear."

She brought it to him obediently, and he began to dig. When the hole was about two feet deep, he saw the dampness that indicated water was just beneath. He dug a little deeper, watched it bubble up from out of the soil. He reached in, wet his fingers, tasted them.

"What is it?" Mr. Choremi who had appeared from somewhere was anxiously watching.

"See for yourself," said Chris. He stood up and hugged the girl. He said, "It's water, Betsy. Water! You showed me how to do it."

"Honey," she said looking at him. "I want you to start a volcano right now."

Chris got busy. But a tap on the shoulder interrupted him. Mr. Choremi said anxiously, "Would you mind telling me how you do it?"

"Not at all," said Chris. "I put my arm around her waist, *so*, and . . ."

*Sam Merwin Jr.*



# ***It's Colder Inside***

*In the middle of the living room*

*was a frightening, mysterious cold spot*

*—where things really got hot!*

**By E. B. BATTLES**

**Illustrated by FLEMINGER**

**A**NGELA Rivers could hear the parrot chittering before she turned her key in the lock. Out of long habit, she kicked the door closed behind her, listened for its solid click. She glanced quickly across to the swinging cage, saw no reason for the bird's alarm—and then, in mid-stride, she noticed the cold.

Slowly, she let one gloved hand come away from her hat; the other

tensed on the strings of the oblong package she was carrying.

"Quiet, Bird," she said to the agitated parrot. Who—or what—had been in her apartment since she had left for work this morning?

The room, shadowed by the shortening day, looked perfectly normal—the parrot cage on its metal standard, the austere rocking chair, the wall of books—

friendly and used—the hit-and-miss braided oval rug, the closed door leading to bed and bath, the corrugated partition half-open on the square yard of kitchen beyond. It all *looked* normal. Nothing *tangible* was amiss. Then why this sense of—invasion?

Angela Rivers walked briskly across the rug, gasping suddenly at the bone-deep chill in its center. Abruptly, as her quickened step took her to the opposite wall beside the green bird, she was warm again and breathless.

Without looking down, Angela dropped the package in the rocker and let her styleless greatcoat fall on top of it. Thoughtfully, without fear, she poised like a sleep-walker — touching, measuring the air in the middle of the room. Then, as a small child climbs steps, first with one foot and then the other drawn up beside it, Angela shuffled sideways, facing that intangible cold center until she had completed the circuit of the rug.

Her outstretched hands had whitened and were stinging like frostbite. A finite but invisible sphere directly over the rug pulsed with incredible cold.

**P**ULL yourself together," Angela chided, not sure she meant herself or her pet. "It's just the furnace gone wrong. The janitor never gets the thermostats right." But the radiators were hot.

She felt as though a chunk of the cold had landed permanently in her viscera.

She heard a meow at her feet. There crouched a female tiger cat wearing a red leather collar. Fur upright, it stared inward at the icy area.

"Hello, Cat," said Angela briskly. "If I'm crazy, at least it's catching."

The parrot fluttered and harangued. From habit, Angela reached beyond the cage for the tin of birdseed in the wall niche, lifted the feed dish from the wire cage and poured it half-full. The bird watched greedily, twittering with ingratitude, then proceeded to stuff.

"You are an ugly bird and you have an ugly disposition," Angela said snappishly.

The mood was gone. She watched the parrot begin to arrange ruffled plumage. She felt the cat tug at her ankle with every evidence of its normal animosity. It stalked past her to the kitchenette. Angela, her eyebrows quirked, brushed her warmed hands together and shrugged.

She hung up the coat, tied an apron over her skirt, then prepared and ate dinner. She buried her hamburger in chopped raw onion, for there was no one to mind her breath. That was one of the satisfactions of living alone.

Angela felt that neither cat nor

parent was any real company. The former slept most of the time—the latter never bothered to talk. She had installed both as official trap-pings of her spinsterhood on her thirtieth birthday eight years before. She didn't much mind being a spinster. Her job was secure and she had a comfortable apartment. She had a four-year-old grand-niece named Ella to spoil, and she had a living room walled with books to read. So Angela and her pets grew older and dustier.

She hung the tea towel, then scooped a mound of canned meat into a dish on the floor. The cat eyed the offering with apparent disgust and turned its back, tail switching. Angela traced the cat's dislike from the day she had first buckled on its collar. It retaliated now by scratching her every time she tried to remove it.

With pleasurable anticipation, Angela finally sank into the rocker to open the oblong package containing a gift for Ella's birthday next week.

The lid fell away from a life-size baby doll, a saran and polyethylene mannikin that, according to its tag, had all the good aspects as well as a few of the unpleasant ones of real infants. It was expensively and unrealistically dressed in starched voile. Angela pinched its foam-rubber arm. A plaintive sound issued from its middle.

Angela's expression changed from simple interest to enchantment. Carefully, like a delighted child, she lifted it free and examined its eyes and mouth and lace-trimmed garments. She smoothed a stiff saran curl around one forefinger.

"I won't wrap you yet," she said fondly. "Ella won't half appreciate you, anyway."

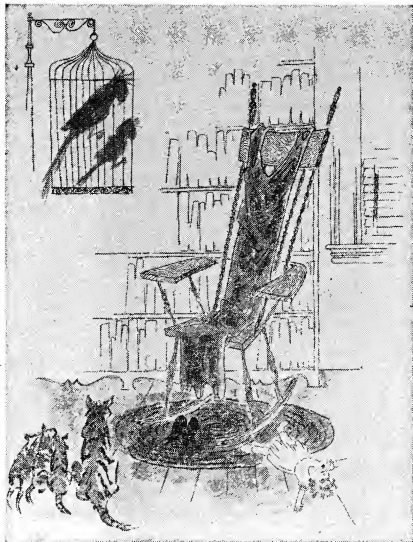
**T**HAT night, she ignored her reading. She simply fondled the doll. At ten o'clock, she moved to lift it back into the box, then, with decision, shoved aside some books and set it in the wall recess instead. Angela backed away to study the effect, tripping against the cage.

"*That* for you!" she told the parrot, lifting its standard across in front of the chair. The bird squawked. But then, it often squawked.

She did not realize that the cage was standing inside the boundary of the invisible sphere, now neither finite nor cold. That was on Wednesday.

She thought of it on Thursday, however. When she unlocked the door at 5:45 and strode in past the cage to see the doll, she felt a trailing chill. Her smile went rigid.

"B-bird?" she asked, a little querulously. The cage, still swinging, held a comic section covering



its floor, two glass dishes for birdseed and water, and a faded green feather.

The parrot was gone.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are!" Angela quoted hopefully, but she knew by the latched door that her pet was nowhere in the room.

The doll sat stiffly in the recess. Angela grabbed it absently and backed into the kitchenette, nearly assaulting the cat, which cowered on the linoleum. She pulled the corrugated partition to, drew a deep breath.

"Cat, we need a vacation," she said.

The cat relaxed, disdained a fresh scoop of pet food, pawed Angela's ankle with more than usual savagery, then went behind the stove to sulk.

Angela ate pensively—aromatic limburger on rye, for there was no one to mind.

She dallied over cleaning up as long as possible, even straightened the string drawer. The clock chimed quarter after eight and she was sponging the stove for the third time when something in the living room said, "*Ork!*"

Angela pushed aside the partition and leaped to the cage. There, resting on panels six and seven of Dick Tracy, was the parrot. It was not in the least tired-looking, however—its plumage had never been so vivid and the one

yellow eye surveying Angela was bright and ornery.

"Where," asked Angela, fists on hips, "have you been?"

The parrot stood up proudly, revealing a pale, slightly luminescent egg.

"Dear me!" apologized Angela hastily. "I always thought you were a boy."

She watched, uneasy but fascinated, as the eggshell cracked. "Where *have* you been," she repeated helplessly while a sticky green head emerged. Its parent orked maternally and kicked aside the splintered shell.

Angela didn't catch up on her reading that night either.

That was Thursday.

ON Friday, the cat disappeared. Arriving as usual at 5:45, Angela was chilled to the marrow the second she stepped inside the door. The red leather collar, still buckled, lay incriminatingly in the exact center of the braided rug.

She ransacked shelves, drawers and closets. She looked under the sink. No cat was to be found.

"Bird," said Angela timorously, "did you see this abduction?"

The parrot eyed its mistress indifferently and turned to coo at its downy offspring. Even Angela could see that this was an unusually handsome young bird. No wonder the parrot was so disgustingly maternal.

Although the delicatessen spaghetti was redolent of garlic and there was no one to mind, Angela scarcely ate. Instead, she sat rigidly in the rocker, clutching the doll under one arm and searching from reference to reference in a none-too-recent encyclopedia.

"Let's see," she muttered through a headache of concentration. "There just has to be a rational explanation. It's a gadget of some sort—like television. That's it. It just happens to be focused on my room. But who operates it? How does he do it?"

She made a mental dossier. Things started with the cold; somewhere around five P.M., the center of the room grew cold, like the arctic in midwinter, like—deep space. Space! It rejected dead things like leather, even if organic, but it transmitted horny growths like the talons and bill of the parrot.

Where did it take this living protoplasm? Not anywhere on earth, for no bird egg could be fertilized and hatched in a day. So *time* had to be outside this planetary dimension. Dimension—fourth dimension?

"That's been overdone," said Angela bitterly. "It's either the *fifth* dimension or it's none at all."

She read an obscure interpretation of relativity and she did not understand at all what Planck

was so constant about. She held a forefinger on her place in the book, closed her eyes and meditated. Well, time might mean nothing in its ordinary sense, but at least the phenomenon was regular—coming and fading at five o'clock, returning at eight-fifteen. Angela's glance swept from wrist-watch to clock.

"Anyway, I'm synchronized."

She was petrified, holding her breath, as the clock struck the quarter hour. When the chill came, she already had gooseflesh down her back. Something meowed. She turned her eyes from the clock, utterly incredulous.

Luxuriously furred, tiger coat gleaming with good health, the cat stood in the center of the rug.

"W-here . . .?" began Angela.

Materializing behind the cat were four blue-ribbon quality, half-grown kittens. The cat purred and led them proudly to the kitchenette, where they clustered and clamored around the empty dish.

THE encyclopedias slid to the floor. Angela clutched the doll tight.

"I don't suppose you have any explanation," she said sharply, following the parade kitchenward.

She stepped carefully around the litter of cats and opened the refrigerator for pet food. In slow anger, she served them. The mother cat cocked her head at



Angela and suddenly rubbed affectionately against her stocking.

"Well, anyway, it improved your disposition," her mistress snarled.

That was Friday.

Saturday was Angela's day off, a day for relaxing, for cleaning, mending, reading — for catching up with the myriad details so satisfying to the spinster heart. But this Saturday was unlike any other.

Dreamily, she walked about from kitchen to living room, bedroom to bath, then back again to ponder at the edge of the rug. The room was warm—it should have been cheerful. The parrot cooed softly in her cage, the cat purred over her young, the doll sat starchy and expressionless in its niche in the wall.

Angela stopped restlessly before the doll, stared moodily for a long moment, picked it up. She squeezed it and, somewhere in its middle, a mechanism cooed. The face remained unchanged, lifeless.

Angela dropped it, face downward, in the rocker. It jiggled back and forth with the motion of the chair, then fell to the floor, unalive, unsatisfying.

Angela felt empty.

*I must be hungry*, she thought. She breakfasted at noon on coffee. Then she began her pacing again—kitchen to living room to bedroom to bath.

As long as she was there, she might as well bathe, and she did, opening some gift bubble-bath for the first time. She even powdered, although there was no one to care. She slipped into her one good black-sequined dress and paced some more. The empty feeling stayed. *I must be hungry*, she thought again.

She looked at the spaghetti, now chill in its refrigerator dish, and shook her head. From the crisper, she took lettuce and tomatoes and celery for salad. Her hand hovered over a green onion, then bypassed it decisively. She salted and peppered her salad and ate it solemnly.

She finished with a sprig of clean-smelling mint.

With deliberation, she pulled the rocker by its arms to the exact center of the room, looked around at the purring cat, the cooing parrot, the doll awry on the floor. The clock began to chime.

"Nothing ventured, nothing gained," said Angela Rivers and sat down.

When the cold abated, there was nothing in the still-moving rocker but a black-sequined dress and a dozen hairpins.

*E. B. Battles*



*Naturally, Lenore couldn't put her soul into a movie. She'd sold it . . . and now the trick was to buy it back at a profit!*

# AGE CANNOT WITHER

By CLEVE CARTMILL

Illustrated by KOSSIN

**M**Y MANY friends, whom I can count on one hand with my thumb in a splint, would have told me I was insane not to promise the moon to a big producer like Zachary—if he wanted the moon.

He did, and I promised.

"But," I said, flipping cigarette ash into his chrome wastebasket, "it will have to wait a couple of weeks."

Zach put plump palms on a desk that looked like Lindbergh





AGE CANNOT WITHER

Field with a high gloss. "Weeks?" he cried. "A couple of hours, Al—maybe two days. Weeks, no!"

"Weeks, yes. I'm going on a honeymoon, beginning tomorrow. Is it my fault you can't hire competent makeup men?"

"Al, listen," Zach said earnestly. "You haven't heard anything I said. Competent makeup men, you say. Harolde can age anything except maybe whisky. But even when he dyes Lenore's face a battleship gray, she still comes out rosy-looking. Maybe it ain't your fault, but she's your client. I'm going to put it to you straight from the bankroll, Al. For the last part of *The Queen Goes Home*, she's gotta be an old queen. So either her youth goes or she does."

"But you can't do that. She has a contract—signed and locked in my safe. It doesn't say a thing about her youthfulness showing through poor makeup. I'm an agent, not Father Time. I can't make her look older for you."

"You talk to her, Al. Please?"

"That'll age her?" I asked bitterly. But I agreed to talk to her.

I'M not a guy who says, "Isn't that just like a woman?" when one of them does something particularly silly. I don't believe in sex discrimination. But it is just like a woman to use feminine wiles, tears and threats.

I still don't think I'd ever have

wound up in the waiting room of Noreen, Hollywood's astrologer deluxe, if it hadn't been for the tears.

Pat didn't shed many. But it didn't take many of my gentle redhead's tears to wear away my stoniest resolution. After the usual greetings of about-to-be-married people away from each other for a couple of hours, we moved to opposite sides of my desk and I looked over the phone messages. Zach had called four times.

"Picture of a former actors' agent making a final call," I told Pat as I dialed. Her eyes got wide and bluer.

"Remember me?" I asked into the phone. "I used to have a client named Lenore Oslo. Those were the good old days when you were making a movie starring Lenore Oslo."

"Al!" Zach said in a horrified whisper. "Don't talk like that. I got a million in this picture. You want I should—lose it?"

"It isn't your money."

"Al, you got no soul."

"Neither has Lenore, she says. That's why your makeup men can't age her for the camera."

There was a short silence at the other end. "Run through that again, Al," Zach finally said.

"Lenore Oslo, according to her own statement and an alleged agreement, has sold her soul in return for youthful beauty so long as she lives. *Nothing* can ever

make her look any older."

"Is that all?" Zach said in a relieved voice. "Just buy it back, Al. Whoever bought it is in the business and would like a profit. Find out what this character wants for it and, if I can fit it into the budget, we'll deal."

"Zach, for God's sa—"

"If you pull it off, I'll give you a honeymoon at my Palm Springs place. House, servants, swimming pool—the works. Let me know right away, Al. Give Pat my love."

I put down the phone and wondered how you tell a girl you won't marry her, only twenty-four hours away from the wedding.

"How do you tell a girl you won't marry her?" I asked.

Pat frowned. "Please, Al. Not even as a joke."

"I'm not joking. This is for real."

**L**ILY Kung came in on this note. Or maybe she had been there for a while. It's hard to tell with Lily. She has a knack for turning up where she's needed.

Her eyes were Oriental, black and, just then, merry. They looked us over. "What are you doing to her now?" she demanded of me.

"What makes you think I'm doing anything?"

"I can feel it. I felt it all the way up here. It's my father's blood in me, coming to a slow boil." She closed the door and put an arm around Pat. "I bet you're trying

to jilt the poor child."

"Child! She's three months older than you. And I'm not trying to jilt—anyway, how did you . . ." I broke off. It was never any use trying to figure out how Lily knew things. "Anyway," I said again, "not jilt—not really."

Pat suddenly began to cry. I started toward her. Lily gave me one of her patented Empress Dowager looks and I sat helplessly in my chair. She pulled Pat's red head against her tan gabardine suit and patted her curls.

Presently Pat pulled away, dabbed at her eyes and sniffled. "Sorry." She looked directly at me. "What's it all about, Al?"

I tried to figure out where to begin. But, since I couldn't make sense of it myself, how could I explain it?

"The only thing that matters," I said, "is the practical side. I'm through, or about to be through, as an agent, and I won't saddle you with a failure for a husband."

"She'd rather be saddled than scuttled," Lily said. "What's this sudden collapse of success?"

"I'll try to draw you a picture, but it's pretty complex."

I told of Zach's SOS and my interview with Lenore. "She swears it isn't a matter of makeup, but some pact she made. So she'll keep her youthful beauty as long as she lives. She won't look any older and can't be made up to look any

older than she does now, she says. That means she can't play the last sequence in *The Queen Goes Home*. If she can't play it, she's no use to the studio. But, if she gets fired—which is bound to happen—she says she'll ruin me—and she can, having friends, influence and money. A wicked combination, as she took pains to point out."

"I can just hear her drawling it," Lily said.

"But why?" Pat asked. "Why should she be sore at you?"

"For not protecting her interests, as she puts it. If I were the proper kind of agent, she says, I'd see to it that she's kept in the picture even if the ending had to be rewritten."

"Oh, brother!" Lily murmured.

**T**HE contracts are so tight on that picture that not even the author could rewrite it. So, Lenore will drop a word here, a dollar there—and, first thing you know, I'll be fresh out of clients. And the rent two months owing."

"She bartered her soul," Lily asked, "for lifelong beauty? Through whom?"

"Oh, she says with some character—I forget the name. It's all a lot of nonsense."

"I didn't say with whom, I said *through* whom. Who acted as go-between, mediator—you know, medium?"

"Oh. Noreen, she says, but surely you don't believe—"

"What are we waiting for?" Lily broke in. "Let's go see Noreen."

"Now, Lily," I protested. "Please! No underworld spirits."

"Who knows? My father was a Chinese physician, and his father and his father and so on, back to the days when odd things were usual. My father had told me some strange things."

"But this is today!"

"Today," she said and it didn't sound corny somehow, "is but the child of all its yesterdays. Besides," she went on crisply, "you asked Pat to marry you and you're going to breach no promises to her. I'll make noises like a shotgun wedding, if necessary. Heaven knows why she wants to marry you, even if you are my agent, but she does and that's that, as far as I'm concerned."

I looked at Pat. "I'm not trying to get out of *marrying* you, baby," I said.

"I know, Al," she said softly. "But it wouldn't hurt to investigate a little more, would it?"

Later in the day, Pat, Lily, and I were in Noreen's waiting room, part of a suite in Hollywood's handsomest hostelry. It looked comfortable and rich. There wasn't a single sign of the zodiac in sight.

Her secretary was a concession to her customers, who were mainly

women with time and boredom on their creamed and manicured hands. He was a young man with great dark eyes and a purple suit that set off wide shoulders and slim hips. He slithered toward us in a Herpetological glide, gave us an undertaker's smile and, dismissing Lily and me with a nod of his plastered hair, asked Pat if she had an appointment.

Pat, a little breathless, pointed at me. His eyes took on a touch of condenscension as he turned to me and I barely resisted an impulse to clout him across the chops. I told him my name. He disappeared through an inner door.

"You'd better come in with me," I said to Pat grimly.

"Leave Pretty Boy to me," Lily said. "I'll stand guard over our lamb."

Noreen followed Pretty Boy into the waiting room. I felt immediately that here was a woman who knew her business, whatever it might be. She was tall and trim in a brown tailored suit. Her eyes were cold, direct, empty of nonsense—also ice-blue. You felt that no single strand of her blonde hair would *dare* to stray out of place.

She said to me, "Yes?"

"I'd like to talk to you about Lenore Oslo."

"I never heard of her," she said. "And since you have no appointment—" She broke off as she no-

ticed Lily. Noreen stared at her for a long time—at least, it seemed a long time. "Come with me," she said to Lily. She turned to me. "You wait here, please." They went through the inner door.

THE secretary sat at the desk and kept an eye on me. I watched the door through which Lily and Noreen had vanished. Why had she wanted to speak to Lily?

In a short time, Lily came to the door. Her black eyes were thoughtful. "Come on in," she said. "You too, Pat."

Noreen was candid to the point of bluntness when we were all seated. "This is a business establishment," she said. "It's a clearing house or a transfer point, so to speak. Clients come here seeking information or advice. I relay their requests, depending on the fee—to sellers of such information or advice. I, personally, do nothing for them. As far as I'm concerned, the whole business is mumbo-jumbo. I tell those who believe in toads' toes and bats' blood that I think it's nonsense, but wouldn't it be a lark to try it?"

She turned to Lily with a curious respect. "You brought up a couple of things I'd rather forget. Also, you—" She broke off, thought a moment, then smiled at Pat the way people do—with her heart. "You, child, are born for happi-

ness. I've never seen you before and may never see you again, but . . ." She smiled again.

"What do you want to know?" she asked Lily.

"You said that you, personally, did nothing for your clients. But, you made an exception in Lenore's case, didn't you?"

"Yes. The only exception."

"Until now," Lily amended.

"Until now," Noreen agreed.

"Why?" I asked. "Why the exceptions?"

"Money, in Lenore's case."

"Just what did happen when Lenore was here?" Lily asked.

Noreen frowned. She glanced at Pat then stared for some time at Lily. "I know I shouldn't say anything about my dealings with other customers, but after what you showed me and—er, told me—" she shrugged tailored shoulders—"I've made up my mind, anyway. I hope I shan't be sorry. When Lenore Oslo came here, she wasn't even a movie star. She wasn't even an actress."

"She still isn't," I said. "I'm her agent. I know."

She brushed that aside. "Lenore belonged, at that time, to some cult she'd joined during her days in Paris. I don't know much about the cult, and I don't want to know. But she came in, breathing money at every pore. You know her way?"

"We know," Lily said.

"Well, she wanted to draw up a pact. She made a big production of her proposition, and I told her I didn't have the foggiest idea what she was talking about. So then she told me . . ." Noreen made a flapping motion with manicured fingers. "This is too silly. Why go on with it?"

"Please!" Lily said. It was more of a command than a request.

Noreen nodded. "All right. According to Lenore, when certain rites were performed by one who . . ." She paused again and appealed to Lily. "*You* tell it—it sounds idiotic to me."

Lily made no bones about it. It was real to her and, the way she explained it, it sounded true.

"Long ago," she said, "it was learned that certain forces—shall we say?—would fill requests if these—forces were brought into play according to rigid rules. Not just anybody could evoke these forces. Only those who existed on two or more planes, whether they themselves were aware of it or not, had the power to make contact with these forces. If the right conditions existed and the rules were observed, the contact could be established."

"The way you put it," Noreen said dryly, "makes more sense than Lenore's version. Not much, but some. Well, she'd said she wanted to make a pact and was willing to trade her soul, which





she said these—uh—forces would accept. So I told her to leave, that I'd never seen a soul, that I wouldn't know one from a Buick. I also told her, even if there *were* such things, she could trade hers at some other soul broker's."

"That was Lenore's cue," Lily put in, "to make more dollar sign noises."

Noreen smiled faintly. "She did. We drew up the pact, and I performed certain rites according to a kind of book—something which she called the *Arcanomen*. She had me burn the pact in an odd fashion." Noreen stared into space

for a moment, then shook her head, as if she were dislodging unpleasant visions. "I haven't seen her since."

I got to my feet. "Well, I guess that's that. Come on, kids, let's go."

"Wait, Al," Lily said.

I sighed. I sat down. I looked at Noreen. I looked at the ceiling, the walls, the shine on my shoes. I thought about my income tax.

LILY moved to the middle of the office and asked Noreen for chalk and incense. "This—um—force," Lily said. "Did it have a name, the one she made the pact with?"

Noreen frowned. "Yes. It was—let me think—*Camul*, that's it. *Camul*."

Lily burned incense. Then she began to change. I don't mean that she assumed a different form. She just changed from a Chinese-American girl to something rather impressive. You didn't notice her pretty gams or her Saks' outfit, You noticed her eyes, and her hands. She looked like a priestess.

She drew a diagram on Noreen's Persian rug. She recited something I couldn't understand. I could feel it, though. It was a chill on the back of my neck. It was a cold breeze from—from Otherwhere.

Lily was quiet, poised, expectant.

We waited.

We waited some more.

Nothing happened.

Lily got up off her knees, brushing chalk from her skirt. She gave us a wry smile. "It was worth trying," she said. "Thanks anyway, Noreen."

Noreen heaved a sigh. "Thank God!" she breathed. "I'm glad there was nothing to it. Believe me, I'm *glad!*"

Then we all looked at the opening door. Pretty Boy stuck his head through. "There's a Mr. Camul here," he said. "I can't get rid of him. He insists somebody here called him. What shall I do?"

There have been times when I've toyed with the thought of what would happen if you could quick-freeze people while they were engaged in routine activity—what would they look like? I found out. Pat, Lily and I were on our way out. Noreen was rising from her chair to say good-by, when Pretty Boy dropped his two cents. It must have been a good ten seconds before anything moved but my eyes, taking in the picture.

Noreen sank back into her chair, very pale, and tried three times before she said, "Show him in."

I don't know what I expected. Something by Doré, perhaps. Something with two heads, maybe.

His shirt was mad, his socks screamed. He was breezy, with a cheerful grin, and was about the size of an ex-jockey.

"Well," he said briskly, "let's get it over with. I had the dice and was really hot—no pun intended. Who called me?"

"So you're Camul," Lily said.

He gave her a slow, disrobing appraisal. "Very nice," he said. "Ve-ry Nice!" He turned his attention to Pat and whistled softly. He looked at me. "Yours, Junior?"

"Mine, stupid."

He shrugged. "Oh, well. One man's frau is another man's frau-lein. Do you play cards, little red-head?"

"Lay off," I said.

"No offense, pal—no offense. You got something special there. And lookit the blonde!" He eyed Noreen. "I remember you, I think. No, don't help me!" He screwed his eyes shut. "You make with spells. You're Noreen."

**E**VEN a handsome woman like Noreen doesn't look too good with her mouth hanging open. She must have realized it, because she snapped it shut. Lily was thoughtful. Pat was wide-eyed.

"Let's get something straight," I said to Camul, feeling like a damned fool. "Are you a demon?"

"What else, pal?"

"Where are you from?"

"Oh," he began, "here and—" He stopped and grinned at me. "You'll find out—some day."

He was about as eerie or supernatural as custard pie. He read my

expression and sighed. "I guess I have to prove it again. Why does this always happen? Watch!"

He took hold of his nose with one hand and stuck his other arm straight up, like somebody diving feet-first from a high board. He sank straight down through the floor, slowly—winking at me on the way down—and disappeared.

Then, while I was still staring at the floor, an unseen finger dug me in the ribs, a bodiless voice said, "Ticklish, pal?"

I crashed against the opposite wall in a spasmodic leap. When I had turned around, he was there again, grinning. But he wasn't the same—he had on a different shirt.

He caught my look. He glanced at his shirt. "*Oops!*" he said. "I forgot. I wear this one tomorrow."

He vanished again. He was back in a moment, wearing the shirt he'd first worn.

I didn't relax, exactly, but I took time out to check the effect these comings and goings, plus my jumping around had had on the others. They seemed more dazed than anything else. There was no doubt in my mind now. I believed Camul was what he claimed, even if he didn't bring any smell of brimstone with him. But it was kind of hard to take in all at once.

Noreen came out of it first. She was angry. Her eyes blazed. "Get that—that *thing* out of here!" she said. "I want no part of this! He's

—*real*. Go on! Get him out!"

"You'd think," Lily finally said, "that if I were going to conjure up something, I could have done better than this. Camul, I fear you're going to be a problem."

Camul inclined his head. "I'm your handy man, dream girl, to some extent. I'm all yours to command—almost."

Noreen repeated, "Get him out of here!"

Pat said, "Aren't we forgetting the main issue? Wouldn't it be a good idea to get at it?"

Lily asked, "What did you mean, *almost?*"

"*Please!*" Noreen begged. "Please, please, *please!*"

Camul turned to her. "Relax, Blondie. Then, to Lily, "You'll see."

"We'd better go see Lenore," Pat whispered. "After all, that's why—"

"Not *that* dame!" Camul interrupted. "I remember her."

"Oh, *God!*" Noreen moaned.

"I summoned you," Lily said. "It was properly done. I am in complete control of you."

"You want chapter and verse?" Camul grinned. "That evocation. It only gives you control under certain conditions."

"What conditions?"

He chuckled. "I see you didn't get far enough in your education. Not quite. You make one slip, and I can do what I like." He looked

at Pat. "And you know what I'd like? I'd like you, little redhead. You're sweet." He turned back to Lily. "So, go ahead, dream girl, command me."

**I** HAD started toward him when he turned his attention on Pat, but Lily stepped in front of me.

"No, Al. Take it easy."

"Demon or not," I said. "I'm going to knock him loose from his hinges, if he doesn't leave Pat alone."

"Please—*get out!*" Noreen was almost crying.

Camul looked at me. His topaz eyes were filled with speculation, with malice. "Boy Scout," he sneered.

"I'm warning you. Lay off!"

"Pat's right," Lily said calmly. "We'd better go see Lenore."

"I don't want to see anybody," Camul objected. "Especially her. I want to play roulette. I worked out a system."

"You're coming with us," Lily said grimly. "Why do you think I called you up? To look at that shirt? Noreen can stay here."

"I don't have to go with you," Camul declared.

"Why not?"

He was quiet a moment. Maybe he was thinking, maybe listening. It was hard to tell.

Finally he sighed. "Yeah, I guess I do. Okay, lead on. But that dame! Hades help us!"

**I** SIGNALLED to Lily to move ahead with Camul when we reached the lobby, and took Pat aside. We stopped before an illuminated tank of tropical fish.

"Just what," I inquired, "do you suppose we're getting into?"

Pat watched an angelfish, its fins idling. "I know what you mean, Al, and I'm scared."

"All we wanted to do was get married. I let myself get talked into trying to help Zach out of a jam, and now we've got a Something on our hands. What's he supposed to be, anyway?"

"Camul?"

"Camul."

"I don't exactly know," Pat said. "But whatever it is, I don't like it."

"Then that does it. Let's chuck this melodrama. How would you like to marry me?"

She gave me an answer, with no words, that was better than a Browning sonnet. When she caught her breath, she said, "But we can't pull out now, Al. I can't marry you until this is settled."

"That's a switch. That was *my* line earlier. How come we can't pull out? Lily can handle it without us, from here on in."

"*Can* she? Remember what Camul said about her making a slip? What if she does? He's in command then, he said."

"But what could I do about it? This is strictly out of my league."

"Al, you can do something about anything. I think you're wonderful."

"In spite of what everybody else says? Thanks. But look, sweetheart, I've been thinking. Why should I worry whether Lenore get fired or not? What's it to me if Zach loses his shirt? Why, for that matter, should I care if Hollywood ever turns out another picture?"

Pat giggled. "Don't ever let Zach hear you talk that way."

"Yeah, he'd have me burned at the stake. But you know what I mean. How can anything matter but happiness, if we're playing with a cold deck? So I say, let's take off. What difference does it make if I'm an agent or a hod carrier?"

"And Lily? She got into this to get us out of it, you know."

"That's confusing, but I get it. If only I'd . . ."

No use "ifing." I took her elbow and steered her toward Lily and Camul. We all solemnly walked through the lobby.

Then Camul asked me for some money.

"What for?" I countered.

He pointed. "I want to get into the game."

We were outside, on the way to my parked car. Two newsboys, about eight or ten years old, were pitching pennies at a line on the sidewalk.

"We've got no time," I said and moved on.

He caught me by the arm. "You'd do well to stay in solid with me, Junior."

"Would I?" I asked Lily. I really wanted to know.

She shrugged. "I wouldn't know. Apparently, my father didn't teach me all he should have. Why be so childish?" she asked Camul.

"I like to gamble," he said. "It won't take long to clean out this game, then we'll go."

LILY shrugged again, so I dolced out a few pennies. He ambled over to the boys, showed the coins.

"At's a zooty shirt, bub," one said. "Sell it?"

"Maybe you can win it," Camul said.

The boys were good. They laid their coins within an inch of the line on almost every pitch. But Camul had the edge on them.

He placed his pennies in a little stack between his feet before each toss. He flipped the coin awkwardly, so that it turned in the air. It would come to a dead stop on the sidewalk, reverse its direction, bounce, twist and fall flat on the line. Camul would then step forward and collect the three pennies.

On his third pitch, I kept my eyes on him, instead of on his coin as the others did. It was no sooner in the air than he vanished. I

could fill in the picture from there. He was back in his pitching position the instant the penny came to rest.

The boys let him take three straight games before doing anything. When he picked up his fourth winnings, one of them kicked him—he was a natural target, bending over. Camul yelled, whirled and the second boy butted him in the stomach.

"Give 'em back," the first boy said. "I dunno how you do it, but yau can't cheat us and get away with it."

"Or we're gonna whip you," the second boy said.

Camul backed away as they advanced.

"Give 'em back," the first boy repeated.

"I won't do it! I won."

"We ain't kiddin', bub. We worked for them pennies."

"They're *mine*!"

The boys moved in. One tackled him around the knees, the other kicked his face as he fell. Camul jerked open hands up to protect himself, scattering pennies. The boys scooped up the spoils and raced away.

Camul got to his feet. He wasn't pleasant to see. He glared after the boys, but made no move. He raked us with blazing eyes.

"All right," he snarled. "Let's go!"

He rode in front with me. None

of us spoke for a while. Demon or not, he *looked* human, and it's embarrassing to see somebody make a fool of himself over a few pennies.

"If anybody's interested," Lily said from the back seat, "I'm ashamed of myself. What I called up from the vasty deep is a vesty dope."

"You wait," Camul muttered. "One slip, 'at's all I ask."

"Even if she does slip," I said, "you couldn't really do anything about it."

"Ha!"

"Then how come you fouled up back there? You came in a bad last with two little kids. Why didn't you just disappear when they jumped you?"

"Shut up! Any stupe could figure that out."

After a few more curves up through Coldwater Canyon, a thought occurred to me. "You couldn't hang on to the pennies. Is that it?"

"What if it is?"

"But if you had dropped the pennies and disap—"

"Knock it off! I bet you're not so smart sometimes yourself."

"Would I be here?" I said, agreeing.

WHEN he saw Lenore, Camul whistled again. She was something to whistle at, when she came into her library, where we had

been directed by her maid.

At first glance, you might have thought Lenore had just put on something comfortable to receive us. At second glance, you had a feeling that the designer of that dull bronze dress had finished the job and committed triumphant suicide. Her dusky hair, too, had received its measure of devotion. Sleeked back, it was the top of a frame for the fine modeling of her face and her aristocratic ears. A lapis lazuli necklace, looking as if it had left a Pharaoh's daughter for higher wages, formed the lower half of the frame.

Yes, as she walked in on Grecian sandals she was something to whistle at. Lily and Pat gave her a quick appraisal and two frozen smiles. Lenore nodded at them and gave me a look at her brilliant teeth.

"Darling!" she cooed. "You've come!" She handed me her fingertips.

"What a chassis!" Camul observed. He turned to Pat. "Little redhead, she's got you outpointed, but you win a moral decision."

Lenore gave him a look that would have withered a healthy bed of kelp. She took my arm and led me toward the door. "A business matter," she explained to them. "Excuse us for a moment."

In the hall—"Darling—" spoken through her beautiful white-capped teeth—"your friends are always

welcome, but there *are* limits. Who is that rat?"

I told her.

Seeing a leopard change its spots would be dull compared to watching Lenore's transformation from a Queen to a slave girl. It was all the more startling, because she wasn't acting. This change came from deep inside. She went back into the library, knelt before Camul, made a cabalistic sign and murmured an unintelligible phrase.

Camul looked across her bowed head at me, his topaz eyes full of wonder. "Is she nuts?"

"She's paying obeisance," Lily told Camul, "to the envoy of the guy she regards as her lord and master. She's not long out of a Paris demonist cult."

Camul screwed up his face, remembering. "Oh, *that* outfit. Always breaking up crap games with their silly spells." He looked down at Lenore. "Knock it off, kid," he said, not unkindly. "There's nothing official about this." He looked at Lily. "Is there?"

Lenore stood and moved away. She was puzzled.

"That's right," Lily said to Camul, "we haven't told you why you're here."

She explained the jam Zach was in, why Lenore had to age for the final sequence of *The Queen Goes Home* and how nobody had succeeded in making Lenore look any older.

Camul frowned. "Where do I come in, though? I'm no calendar."

"The pact," Lily told him impatiently. "She made it with you through Noreen. It called for life-long youthful beauty. We want it retracted."

Camul gave Lenore a slow, full examination. His face glowed with pleasure. "So that was *you*. I wish I'd known how terrific you really are. I'd have made Halune put up more chips. I don't guess it would have made any difference, though. I had a losin' streak."

He had our complete attention. Nobody breathed as he drew the pause out to the explosion point.

Then he said, "I lost that pact in a crap game . . ."

**L**ENORE recovered first. She leaped at Camul. Her hands were red-tipped claws. A froth of sound, unrelated to speech, gushed from her twisted lips.

Her hands closed on empty space as Camul vanished. She clutched, then clutched again, at where Camul had been.

Camul materialized behind her, on the far side of the room. "*Whew!*" he said. "That was close."

Lenore whirled, glared. "You devil!"

"Not yet," Camul corrected. "Two grades to go yet."

Lenore stalked him, hands still

clawed, in a half crouch.

"*Lenore!*" I said sharply. "Stop hamming!"

She stopped. She gave us a glazed stare. She became civilized, but fury still blazed in her eyes. "Hamming?" she cried. "That was *my* soul he was talking about. My *soul*, don't you understand?"

"We can thrash that out later. Main question now—what do we do next?"

"Get the pact," Lily said.

Camul smiled slightly as Lily turned to him.

"Well," she demanded, "don't loaf. Go get it."

Camul pursed his lips. "There'll be a price, of course."

"We'll pay it."

"Two prices," Camul amended.

"One for me, one for Halune. That was a good pact and nobody likes to give one up once he's got his claws—er, hands—on it. 'Specially on a dish like this Cookie here."

Lenore sparked a little on that, but she had something more important on her mind. "Listen, all of you. I have what I want. I'll look the way I do now, even if I live to be a hundred. I'm not giving that up. If you think you're going to have that pact destroyed for the sake of a silly picture, you're insane."

"You have no choice," Lily pointed out. "I conjured up Camul, and he's under my command. If



I choose to destroy the pact, it's as good as burned."

Lenore thought this over. "Is that true?" she asked Camul. "Can she destroy the pact and cause me to start looking older?"

"I don't have to answer *your* questions," Camul said. "Only hers. But, to save kicking it back and forth, I'll tell you. The answer is yes. She can do it—for a price."

Lenore turned to Lily. It was with a curious, resigned dignity that she asked, "Are you going to do that to me?"

"No," Lily said. "I never intended to. I think there's a way out. All I wanted was for you to let me handle it the way I think best. Okay?"

"Okay, and thanks," Lenore whispered.

"You listen to me," Lily said to Camul. "We want this pact to be inoperative for—uh—how many days, Al?"

"I'll call Zach and see."

**Z**ACHARY was delighted. "Al, you sound better than a chorus by Jimmy Noone. I won't ever forget you till this is over. We can shoot the scenes with the old queen in three days, Al."

"It may cost something."

"I'll pay anything, Al, *anything*—as long as it's inside the budget."

Lily thought it over, after I told her. "Three days," she mused. "Listen, you," she said to Camul.

"I'd hate to have anything go wrong at this point. You mentioned that, if I made a wrong command, you could chisel out of it."

"Maybe I didn't make myself quite clear, dream girl," Camul said with a smile. "I won't chisel out of it—I'll take over. You'll be subject to my commands if you make a slip. And I got me a project in mind."

"Just what does that mean, you'll take over? What can you do?"

"I don't have to tell you that."

"Even if I command you to tell me?" Lily asked.

"Try it."

Lily looked at me and made a gesture of helplessness. "I don't know how far I can go. Maybe he's bluffing, maybe not. I don't dare command him to tell me how far I can go."

I wondered if Pat was included in his project. "Don't take any chances," I told Lily.

"Then answer me this, Camul," Lily said. "If I command you to have the pact suspended for three days, will I be out of line?"

"Nope. That can be done for a price—or rather, two prices."

"How about you, Lenore? If the pact goes back into operation in three days, will you be satisfied?"

"As you pointed out," Lenore answered, "I have no voice in the matter. Why ask me?"

"A very practical reason," Lily

answered. "At the time you made this pact through Noreen, you looked as young and beautiful as you do now. But if you had made any previous pacts superseded by this one—well, it all comes down to this—for all I know, you may be hundreds of years old, seeming youthful by virtue of a series of agreements. If this pact is suspended, you might fall apart before our eyes. That would be messy."

Lenore laughed. "That's very thoughtful of you. No, I'm what I seem to be, except that I haven't aged any in appearance since Noreen executed the pact. That wasn't so long ago that I'm not willing to take a chance."

"Then get at it," Lily ordered Camul.

**H**E slewed his topaz eyes at Pat and it was perfectly clear to me what he wanted. I had split the distance between us when he said, "Not that, pal. You got me wrong." He spoke to Lily. "What I want is for this little redhead to take me around to joints where I can gamble each night, as long as I'm needed here."

"Then deal us out," I said. "Pat and I are getting married tomorrow."

Silence fell while they adjusted to that fact. Even Pat, by her expression, had apparently lost sight of our proposed nuptials.

"Well," Camul said presently, "now's the best time to call it off, before anybody gets hurt. You might as well send me back." This, to Lily.

"I guess so," Lily said.

"From your tone," I said, "you'd think I was doing something criminal. I didn't expect this from you, Lily."

"Just one minute," Lily snapped. "It wasn't long ago that I was practically begging you to forget this mess and go off with Pat and bundle in bliss. But no, you wouldn't saddle her with a failure, you said. Now, all of a sudden, you insist on doing what you refused to do in the first place. What's going on?"

"I see things differently now, that's all. Lenore said she'd ruin me if I didn't keep her in the picture, but that isn't important any more. The implications behind Camul's appearance here make me uncomfortable—and indifferent to the fate of a movie or my career."

"Can I say something?" Lenore asked.

"Let me get into the act," Camul said at the same time. He grinned at Lenore. "After you, Cupcake."

Lenore looked at me. "I won't try to injure you, Al. I think you should go ahead with Pat and forget all this. I—don't like the situation myself. The implications, as you said, are . . ."

She trailed off into silence.

Camul grinned again. "Didn't really believe it before, did you, Cupcake? Don't worry too much about it. You'll be taken care of. But you—" this to me—"are a different matter. Did you ever stop to think that other people besides you might have problems?"

"Does anybody ever really stop to think that? Who do you mean?"

"Me," he said. "I don't know when, if ever, this chance might come up again. I wanna give a wheel a whirl and I'll settle for three days. That ain't so long."

"Long? To have Pat with you and not with me? Only a few centuries."

Pat said, "Al, may I speak to you alone for a minute?" Out in the hall, she said, "Darling, maybe we ought to do it. Believe me, you needn't worry. I'll watch him."

"I don't like it."

"But, in three days, it'll be over and we'll be off to see a minister about all our tomorrows."

**S**HE was probably right. "All right," I said grudgingly, "but why did he have to pick you?"

I asked Camul the same question.

"Didn't you?" He grinned. "For once I'd like to walk into a joint with Heaven on my arm—pardon my language—and have every guy in the place wish I'd turn blue."

"If you make one single pass . . ."

He cut me off. "I ain't allowed to break a promise. So I promise I won't do a single thing she don't want me to. That good enough for you?"

"That's good enough."

"Then you agree, all of you," he asked, "that the little redhead shows me the town each night I'm here?"

We agreed.

"Then that leaves Halonc," Camul said. "Just a minute."

He was gone. We looked at each other. Not steadily, but with eyes that jerked away. It's one thing to admit certain creatures *could* exist—it's another to find yourself partners with one of them.

Lily's eyes held worry. "I wish my father were still alive. I'd find out how not to make this slip Camul is waiting for. I'm out of my depth in this mad muddle. All I know I learned from Father. I hope it's enough."

"Now look, Lily—" I said—"please be careful. Any time you make a command, be sure it's kosher."

"Al, I'm watching every word as if it were my right eye. Which seems to be full at the moment. Hello, Camul. Nice trip?"

He grinned. "Here's how it stacks up. The Body, here, won't get any benefits from the pact for three days, startin' tomorrow morning. After three days, it goes back into effect. *If.*"

"All right," Lily snapped. "Pull out the tenterhooks. If what?"

"If you can get Halune some phonograph records."

That left everybody standing on one foot. I didn't know what we were expecting, but it certainly wasn't a request for records.

"Okay," Lily said calmly, "which ones, how many and what speeds?"

"That's the hard part," Camul said. "A little pick-up combo made twelve sides one day about fifteen years ago. They're collectors' items, and I doubt if any one collector has all six platters. The outfit is Blue Barry on tenor sax, Harry Gay on clarinet and Buford Bey on Bassoon. You see, Halune has three heads, and he plays those instruments. He wants to develop a style like that trio. He thinks they're real cool—no pun intended."

"So between now and tomorrow morning," I said, "we got to get twelve recordings of an unknown band. What if we can't get 'em all?"

"You got to get three. I could stall him on the others, maybe. You got to get *Clarinet Marmalade*, *Gutbucket Blues* and *Ostrich Walk*. Each of these features one of the woodwinds."

"Did you know," I said, "that collectors will give you their wives and kids before they'll give up their records?"

"I don't care how long you take. I got enough to keep me busy." He grinned at Pat.

She looked at me. "I've got an idea, Al. Didn't you say once that Zach has a terrific collection of records?"

I snorted. "He won't even play some of his rare items. Fat chance we'd have, even if he has 'em. But I'll call him. Maybe we can get a lead, anyway."

I GAVE him the data. "You got 'em?"

"My pets!" Zach yelped. "There's never been anything as good since Genesis, Al. Me, I'm the only one in the country with all twelve sides. I didn't know you were interested in jazz, Al."

"Well, you might call my interest—oblique. But I must have those records, Zach."

"You—what?" he shouted.

"That's right. I need 'em."

"In two words, en-oh!"

"You want to finish *The Queen Goes Home*?"

"I better—or I go home."

"Make your choice, then."

"No and no and no. Period!"

"Six pieces of wax for the greatest picture of the age?"

"En-oh!" he howled. "Pure jazz, Al, not a paper man in the outfit. No, not even for the moon. But I'll tell you what I'll do, Al. I'll have copies made for you."

I checked with Camul. His an-

swer was shorter than Zach's. He didn't say anything, just glared.

"No copies," I told Zach.

"Then it was nice knowing you, Al."

Lily made motions at me. I covered the transmitter.

"Ask him how long he'll be at the studio," Lily said.

"About an hour," Zach answered my question. "But if you're coming over, Al, it won't do you good and it'll just boil me."

"That's a happy thought," I said and hung up. I turned to Lily. "What goes?"

"We'll steal 'em. Does it matter," she asked Camul, "how we get them?"

"Nope."

"You come along, Camul. You may be useful." Lily started for the door.

"I'm going, too," Pat said.

I raised eyebrows at Lenore. She shook her beautiful, empty head. "I must compose myself. I must find peace, for the morrow."

"She's herself again," Lily said. "Come on, Al."

**Z**ACHARY'S English butler turned his eyes to ice cubes. "Yes?"

"Mr. Zachary asked us to wait for him in his music room," I explained.

He knew me and Pat, but made it clear with his eyebrows that the four of us together were not

regular procedure. "Follow me," he said as he led the way into the room where a Capehart looked warmly at shelves and shelves of records. The butler went away and Lily began searching Zach's record index. Presently, she found the album and stuck it under her arm.

"Let's go," she said.

"How about the butler?" I asked.

"Camul will now disappear and heckle the butler until we are outside. Well?" she asked him.

He grinned, faded out and we went to the front door. As it closed behind us, a startled yell rang out inside the house. Camul joined us, still invisible but chuckling, as we reached the sidewalk—just as Zachary drove up in his yellow convertible.

"So," he said grimly, jumping out. "A hunch got me and I got you. Give me my records!"

He advanced on Lily and I put myself between them. "Zach, listen."

"I got no ears for you, Al. I'm gonna have you tossed so far in jail you couldn't get out even as a ghost."

"Zach, we've got to have these records. Relax and let me tell you."

"Sure, Al, I'll relax." He began to yell at the top of his voice. "Help, police, *police, police!*"

Lily said in a low voice, "Camul, show yourself."

Camul materialized only his face, about six inches from Zach's nose.

The little producer's mouth froze on the last syllable of "police." Then Zachary made a new record for the standing backward broadjump and crashed into his car.

Camul became completely visible.

Lily shoved the album at him. "*Here! Disappear!*"

Camul smiled. The smile spread into a laugh. The laugh became a howl. He rocked back and forth. He gave the album to Zachary, who clutched it to his breast.

Lily's eyes narrowed. "Cut the cacophony. What put you in stitches?"

"*You!*" Camul gasped. He caught his breath, then grinned gleefully at Lily. "I told you you'd make a slip. Remember the pen-nies? You knew I couldn't take anything with me. I didn't think you could locate the records, but if you did, I figured you'd forget. It was a nice gag, no? Yes."

LILY turned to me and Pat. "That churning sound," she said, "is my father in his grave."

Zachary had been standing with his mouth open, staring at Camul. He closed it, opened it again. "How did you do it?"

Camul shrugged. "Pocket mirror."

"Come see me tomorrow," Zach said. "I got a place for you in a picture."

"I don't like cameras."

Zachary made like a fish again. This was heresy.

Before he could speak, I cut in. "What do you mean, gag?" I asked Camul. "You didn't want the records?"

"Nope, nope."

"But it's straight about the pact? Three days?"

"Check."

"Okay. So long, Zach," I said.

He didn't look up as we went away. He was leafing through the album, counting, examining.

When we were in the car, Lily said in a subdued and somewhat fearful voice, "All right, Camul, let's have it. What does it mean?"

Camul chuckled. "It means you can't give me orders any more, little dream girl. It means *I* can give *you* orders, and you have to obey. Want a demonstration?"

"I'll take your word."

"Anyhow," Camul went on, "I'm not gonna give you any orders. All I wanted to do was stay here till I got ready to leave. And every night—remember?—me and the little redhead does the town." He paused thoughtfully, and then, in a tone of voice that made me want to kill him—if it hadn't been too late—he said, "I think I'm gonna stay for a long time. Maybe I'll never go away."

THE bar at the Pyramid Club didn't get much play. Why should it? Waiters circulated trays of free drinks through the white-ties and bare-shouldered crowd at the roulette and other game tables. The bar was more or less a consolation stop.

The drinks I was having with Lily were strictly consolation drinks. "Know what I did last night? I walked. I tried to get drunk in a dive. I walked. I smoked four packs of cigarettes. I walked. And all I saw was Pat and Camul together somewhere. Look at them over there, Lily. Playing roulette and having a ball. I only get to see Pat at the office now. It's hell."

Lily looked thoughtfully into her drink. In a low but matter-of-fact voice, she said, "Have you stopped to think that Camul is my master? Do you know what that means?"

That brought me up short. I hadn't thought about it. I'd been throat-deep in a welter of self-pity. Poor me, lost my girl for two evenings. But Lily . . . Camul had offered to demonstrate his mastery. I had no doubt he could—unpleasantly. That made Lily a slave. An honest-to-god slave in our times.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I mean it. It's about time I got us out of this rat race, don't you think?"

"And don't forget Pat. She

wants out, too, even if she is having fun at the moment. Say, how do you suppose he was allowed in this swankery wearing sport clothes?"

"A character with his connections could probably get in anywhere."

"With one exception."

I thought that over. "Oh, I see what you mean. Look, Lily, I have an idea that might work. If you could just make him mad enough at you . . . let me think."

A few minutes later, Lily took all my money and started for the roulette table. She turned back to me. "I suggest you get in the crap game. Or *chemin de fer*, over there. Or get a chair at one of the poker tables. Or stay here and get tight. Just don't kibitz."

She went away and I had another Scotch. Oh, sure, go somewhere and play. With my girl being escorted by a demon and too many of my dollars about to go down the drain? I took up a post behind Lily.

Play was slow. Bets were placed and garnered unemotionally by the croupier. The wheel spun, the ball chattered on frets, well-bred sighs and exclamations marked success or failure of the players.

Lily seemed to pay no attention to the play. She set out one chip at a time, anywhere, and the croupier's rake gathered it in disdainfully after each spin. Once,

she won back more than I had given her, but she paid little attention. She was merely waiting.

CAMUL played for low stakes, too, and lost consistently. But he was grinning and muttering low-voiced cracks to Pat now and then. This went on for some time, and it suddenly occurred to me that I'd better check in with Zach, to make sure we weren't jumping any guns. I went to a telephone booth.

"It's done, Al," he said happily. "It's terrific. In fact, it's almost good. I don't know what you did, Al, but you did it good. Lenore got old as fast as a mother-in-law's visit. And I'm glad you called, Al. I got something besides pictures to say."

"That's a novelty."

"Al, if I wasn't your friend, I wouldn't dip my schnozz in your backyard. But I get mad at women, the double-timers. And I'm your friend, Al—you know that—even if you did thief my album. Didn't I offer to give you a honeymoon?"

"And a house."

"Look, Al, I hate to tell you this, but Roxie told me he seen your Pat out with a nudnik last night. A gigolo, no less. She was paying."

"So?"

"I just thought I'd put you in the know, Al."

"Okay, you did."

"No hard feelings, Al?"

"No feelings at all."

Back at the table, Lily's stack was done to its original size. Camul placed a large bet on number 17, black. When all bets were placed, the croupier spun the wheel and dropped the ball into the frets. All eyes watched it.

They continued to watch it. For the ball acted as no decent ball should. The croupier's manner said that here was a ball possessed, a ball of low tastes. It skipped. It bounded. It seemed to describe a cartwheel. Finally, it snuggled into number 17, black, wriggled around and stayed there.

The croupier grimly pushed piles of chips at Camul.

"I got a system," Camul said loudly. "Works, huh?"

Well-bred sneers of contempt rippled around the table, but the croupier's attention was on the pill. He picked it up and eyed it. He sniffed at it delicately. He tried to rattle it, close to his ear. He all but licked it.

He frowned, called for bets, dropped the pellet on the wheel. It made an uneventful journey. The house collected most of the bets. This restored the croupier's confidence in the ball to some extent, but that 17 play still haunted him. He watched the ball warily. He sighed with relief each time it fell conventionally into one or another compartment of the wheel.



Camul had gone back to making small bets. Lily continued, one chip at a time, to toss drops of my heart's blood to the Goddess of Chance. She was down to three blue chips. She didn't even appear to be aware of their color or that each one represented a C note.

**T**HEN Camul made another big bet and I saw Lily tense. She had one chip left.

Instead of watching the ball, I watched Lily. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Camul's chair empty, heard exclamations indicating the ball was berserk again and saw Lily slide Camul's chair away from the table.

Then he became visible in a sitting position. He started to sink into the chair that wasn't there, shouted in alarm, grabbed the edge of the table, and pulled himself up so that he was leaning over it, his chin almost over its center.

"*M'sieur!*" the croupier said sharply. "We are ladies and gentlemen here. Control yourself. You have won, yes, but is that a reason for unrestraint? Is that a reason to climb upon my table?"

"I didn't do nothing," Camul protested.

"Nothing, *m'sieur*? Is it nothing that you wallow among the counters? Is it nothing that you mount the table? Is it nothing that you give tongue when you win? You will conduct yourself or I shall

have to ask you to leave."

Camul took his winnings, looked around for his chair, then saw Lily. "Get away!" he rasped. "*Scram!*"

To my horror, Lily waited until Camul was at the table, then slipped her—or rather, my—last chip into his jacket pocket. She joined me.

"Wouldn't you like to give him my shirt?" I asked her.

"Don't be bitter, Al—watch."

"You didn't even get a run for my money. Not only that, you slipped him a hundred bucks. Why didn't you play it? You might have won on the last one."

"He told me to go away, Al. He's master, remember?"

"Let's go get a drink."

"No, wait."

We waited. We were several yards away from the roulette table and the sounds from nearby games prevented our hearing much of what went on—but we could see.

Camul made another big bet. Lily gripped my arm. The wheel spun, touching off a series of odd events.

Camul, completely visible, leaped onto the table as if he were made of air and jumped close to the wheel. He didn't disturb any chips. With a lightning dart of his hand—like a cat snaring a butterfly—he grasped the little ball. With a gleeful grin, he put the ball through a few capers, then dropped

it into the pocket of his number. He whirled, started to return to his chair, but froze when he saw the other players' eyes.

Nobody spoke. They watched in hushed fascination and a silence fell over the entire room. No click of chips, no flutter of cards, no rattle of birdeages.

Camul's mouth dropped open. Then he showed his teeth in what was perhaps the most foolish-looking grin in history.

"Shucks," he said, "you saw me."

"Saw you?" the croupier shrieked. "Your shame was for the world." His voice dropped, became reminiscent and held a note of awe. "For twenty years I have officiated at the greatest palaces of chance. These old eyes have looked on greed, on lust and on murder. Now they have looked their last. Tomorrow I shall retire among my chickens and the little carrots. Tonight I am *finis*." His voice began to rise. He appealed to the players. "You saw him likewise? My senses have not . . . ?" He came to himself, glared up at Camul. "*Off! Off my table! At once! Remove yourself. Shoo, shoo!*" He made shooing motions.

Camul jumped down from the table with a puzzled frown. He felt in his pockets. He found the chip. He looked around and saw us. He flung the chip at us.

"I told you to go away!" he

blazed at Lily. "Now disappear, willya, before I *really* do something."

"It works both ways, doesn't it?" she asked sweetly. "I made a wrong command the other day—you made one tonight. I *can't* disappear, but you can. So back to the tar pits, buster. *Disappear!*"

"*Mille tonnerres!*" the croupier cried in anguish. "He goes! He marches into nothing! Me, I am at an end, myself. The play is at an end. I will pay the bets. You, mademoiselle with the hair so red, were accompanying that—that . . . Eh, bien, I shall pay you, for you bought his chips . . ."

LENORE was happy. You could tell by her languid condescension to Pat and Lily. She gave us drinks, and we congratulated her on what was said to be a fair performance.

"So now you lovebirds are flying to the nest?" she drawled. "How—quaint. I think you're darlings. I shall have something nice for you, when you return."

"Thanks," I said shortly. "Look, Lenore. The reason we dropped in was to find out if the pact is back in force. The agreement was up four hours ago, at midnight."

"Isn't it wonderful?" she burbled. "At twelve-thirty, I tried to make up as the old queen. I couldn't. I'll never look old again, as long as I live."

"After that, what?" Lily asked.

"After that, I don't care."

Her maid entered, calling Lenore to the telephone. We sipped our drinks reflectively. I was wondering what would happen when the time came for Lenore to pay for her beauty. I heard her muffled voice rise to a wail.

"But I *can't*, I tell you!" she said.

She stormed back into the room, dark with anger. "You're my agent!" she snapped. "Let's see you earn that ten per cent. If you don't, so help me . . ." She glared. "There's a little problem on the

phone for you, schnook."

It was Zachary. "Al, listen. You got to do something. You got to get me out of such a jam as ever was. Look, Al, we had an accident in the lab. All the scences with the old queen exploded into nothing but smoke. Al, we got to shoot 'em again, and now Lenore gives me this silliness again about not being able to look old. Listen, Al, I'm your friend, you know that, Al . . ."

*Glenn Catmull*



# They

By D. V. GILDER

*Believe in spooks? Not Miss  
Kennedy—but what this brave  
soul saw was far more ghastly!*

**W**HEN two gay spirits like Miss Letitia Kennedy and her neighbor, Mrs. Sarah Carberry, got together over a cup of tea, what do you suppose they talked about? The trip to Miami they had just returned from? Mrs. Carberry's extraordinary hand of pinochle that broke up the game last evening? The slightly mad new spring hat that perched so elegantly on Miss Kennedy's patrician head?

"Stuff and nonsense, Sarah." Miss Kennedy disposed of the matter with her usual forthrightness. "I suppose They hovered around watching until we left, then moved right in. You're a fool to read those silly books and hold those silly meetings. And I'm a bigger fool to let you run on until we're both nervous. For goodness' sakes, go home and go to bed before I start hearing things, too." Accustomed to the smaller Mrs.

Illustrated by KOSSIN

Carberry's usual docile obedience, Miss Kennedy arose to escort her visitor to the door. Mrs. Carberry sat. Miss Kennedy tapped a narrow foot impatiently. Mrs. Carberry's sitting solidified.

The hostess relented. "Do you want me to walk over with you and look through the house?"

"No, thank you, dear Letitia." Then with shrill firmness, "Nothing could induce me to return to that house tonight. No, nor any other night."

"And may I ask where you plan to stay?" demanded Miss Kennedy suspiciously.

**M**RS. CARBERRY did have the grace to drop her eyes. "Well, you have never used that spare bedroom of yours and probably never will—"

"And neither will you," interrupted Miss Kennedy tartly. "We settled the question of you moving in with me long ago. You're my best friend, Sarah, and I'm extremely fond of you. But for a steady diet, you and those odd friends of yours would have me talking to myself within two days."

Mrs. Carberry might be frightened, but she was loyal. "They aren't odd. Why, Professor James gave a lecture last week on his theory of a fragile line between the worlds that everyone said was simply wonderful. Besides, you talk to yourself sometimes."

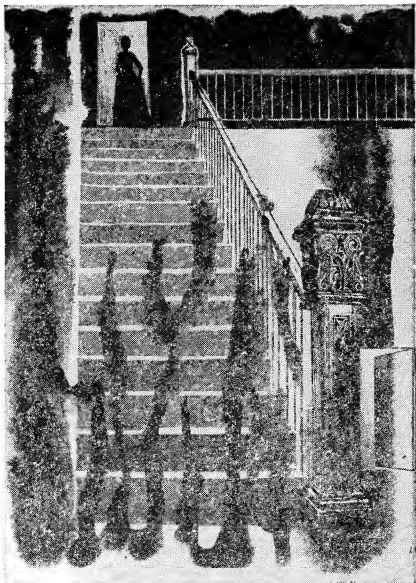
"That's as it may be," said Miss Kennedy. "I still don't want to make a habit of it. And Professor James is another thing. He lectures your little group at your house twice a week. Would you guarantee that my Monday and Thursday evenings wouldn't be spent in the kitchen, while you tried to break that fragile line in the living room? Or cross it, or whatever else you're endeavoring to do to it?"

Mrs. Carberry refused to be enticed into any promises she might be sorry for. Instead, she clasped her hands and gazed pathetically at her only hope. "Please let me stay, Letitia. Please! Surely, you wouldn't drive me out into the night to hunt a place to sleep."

Miss Kennedy made a quick decision. "Very well, Sarah. But I want it understood it's only for this one night. Come along, and I'll get you settled before I leave."

Mrs. Carberry was one of the fortunate ones who forgot her woes the minute they were righted. She did love outings and Letitia always thought up the most charming and novel things to do. "Leave?" she breathed. "Letitia, you *have* planned one of your little excursions. May I go along?"

Miss Kennedy's blue eyes glinted maliciously. "Certainly. I'll be delighted to have you. In fact, I was hoping you'd ask. It will be so much more conclusive than just



coming back in the morning and telling you there's nothing wrong with your house."

The words were soporific. Mrs. Carberry could barely keep her eyes open long enough to stumble to the spare bedroom and accept the proffered nightgown. And, by the time Miss Kennedy had gathered her own night attire and returned to say goodnight, Mrs. Carberry was dead to the world.

A sleeping guest, wanted or unwanted, demands certain courtesies. Miss Kennedy, therefore, slipped quietly out and crept along the hall to the kitchen. Opening the back door the merest crack, to avoid the squeal of protesting hinges, she slid through. Working slowly and soundlessly, she drew the panel shut and almost fell off the porch as the key turned in the lock. Oh, that Sarah was a sly one!

**B**RACING angular shoulders against the chill of the night air, Miss Kennedy scurried along the path and through the gate into the Carberry backyard. That silly goose, Sarah, had turned on every light in the house before she left. And had left the back door open, besides.

Miss Kennedy walked inside and gave the panel a forceful push, just to show she wasn't afraid. The slam was heartening. She even managed a small hum as she went over the lower floor, turn-

ing off lights. Then she climbed the stairs and clicked more buttons until the whole house was dark except for the room at the top of the stairway she had picked to sleep in.

"Just in case I should want to leave in a hurry." Miss Kennedy said aloud, smiling broadly at her little joke.

She closed the door, too, while she undressed. No reason, really —just one of the things one does without thinking. Like reaching up to be sure the high neck of her white cotton gown was modestly buttoned before going back to open it again. And, being old-fashioned, Miss Kennedy might have done the same thing at home.

Saying her prayers under the covers, instead of on her knees, was unusual. At the same time, a white nightgown wasn't something to be exposed to the dusty floors of Mrs. Carberry's slovenly housekeeping.

No, Miss Kennedy was not afraid. For, had she been, could she have gone right to sleep? Because she did. And slept straight through the next fifty-five minutes. It was the light shining in her eyes that woke her up then. Literally, up. Perhaps Mrs. Carberry's talk of the unknown had conditioned her, after all. Anyway, there she was in the middle of the room, staring out through the dark at the ghastly brightness

of the hall light.

She shivered and the shiver shook her back to reality. After a fashion, that is. "It's a long," said Miss Kennedy. "That's all it is. Sarah has a long circuit in her wiring system." And, without waiting for slippers or robe, Miss Kennedy trotted straight into the hall and flipped the switch.

The stairwell lighted her way back to bed adequately. The oddity of that beacon struck her just as she was closing her eyes again. This time, fearing she already knew the answer, she took time to don slippers and robe. Which was well, because the downstairs lights were all on again.

Her second tour of the rooms to turn them off wasn't made as bravely as the first. What about her theory of a long in the wires? Well, actually, that had only been a childish delusion used to extinguish the hall light. And Miss Kennedy, unlike others, wasn't to be fooled twice in the same manner.

Too, Miss Kennedy was beginning to feel a slight regret that she had been so free with her pish-tushes. As it was, though she should find the house peopled with millions of Them, the Kennedy pride would hold her there until dawn. That "Them" was a mere figure of thought. It would take more than a few lights to convince her there were beings who might

come poking through some misty partition.

"You," said Miss Kennedy triumphantly to herself, "had your mind on something else and just thought you turned off the lights. It isn't the first stupid trick your memory has pulled, you know."

This from the woman who prided herself vocally and often on her memory? It seemed that the night and the house were having some slight effect on Miss Letitia Kennedy, after all. Yes, indeed, for she didn't usually peer into closets or behind furniture, either.

She did find something, though. Peace of mind enough to go back to bed. Not enough to go right to sleep but, after numerous tossings and turnings, she accomplished that, too. And dreamed . . .

**H**ORRIBLE dreams—peopled hideously with all the mad surmises Sarah Carberry had repeated with horrified fascination. The fantastic theories of Professor James clothed in a monstrous flesh of Miss Kennedy's own originality. Describe them? How to describe great, pasty horrors, capering and gibbering in perfect acme of delight at their own hideousness. When Miss Kennedy felt one more second of listening and looking would drive her completely mad, she forced herself awake.

The indistinct gabbling went



on, but there wasn't a sign of unwelcome visitors in the room. Certainly, she could see. The light was on again in the hall. Miss Kennedy's silvery head vanished under the covers.

Fear is its own anesthetic. After so much of it, only a feeling of numbness is left. Kind of an oh well fatalism. So it was with Miss Kennedy. After some moments of cowering, she pulled her head forth and impersonally surveyed her room and that part of the hall she could see from the bed.

"Supposing They are in the house," she tempted Providence aloud. "What could They do to me? And now that I think of it, that gabble sounds more like a mumble than anything. I believe I'll just get up and take a look."

Undoubtedly a long speech for a time like that, but once started, Miss Kennedy found the sound of a voice, even her own, strangely comforting. She was even on the verge of starting another heartening monologue, when the sudden thought that she might not be the only listener stopped her.

For all her brave talk, she was in no hurry. There was some delay while she dressed, due to the inconvenient squirming it required inside the voluminous folds of her gown. No use shutting the door and perhaps calling attention to her presence before she was properly attired to receive.

Not that she was actually planning to enlarge her list of acquaintances. Not even the anticipation of Sarah's future spellbound "Were they nice?" and "What did they say?" gave Miss Kennedy the desire for a face-to-face meeting. She meant only to localize the murmuring and observe from a safe distance.

"Professor James and his lectures on theories—*bah!*" snorted Miss Kennedy. "Just wait until I give him my lecture on facts."

Her first thought in the hall had been to turn out the light, so that she might descend under cover of darkness. That idea, upon further thought, was discarded as the act of a coward, besides being detrimental to visibility, should she care to cast a glance or two over her shoulder.

She did concede the necessity of tiptoeing down the steps. Ungracefully, it is true, but who was there to see? That was a question that interested Miss Kennedy, too, judging by the number of times she stopped to either peer up, or down, or both. At last, she reached the bottom and stood still to listen.

**T**HERE were voices. Too low for her to make out the words, but loud enough so that she couldn't be mistaken. Everything was all right. Where there were voices, there were bound to be

other—the light went off.

Miss Kennedy screamed. The mumbling stopped. Miss Kennedy screamed again and ran blindly toward where she had last heard the voices. The direction was correct, but the Thing that loomed out of the door she picked was no friend of hers.

She whirled and raced back, seeking the haven of the dark stairway. Alas, it was no longer dark except for the blob of another Thing descending. She turned again, headed for the kitchen and this time there was no interference. The implacable clomping from behind only supplied a needed extra spurt of speed across the tiling for her to snatch the doorknob.

It stuck. Miss Kennedy twisted. The footsteps moved closer. With a strength born of desperation, Miss Kennedy did something she hadn't even tried for years. She went through the door.

Now there were only the short path and her own back steps. With

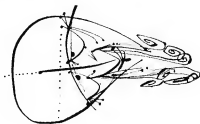
superhuman effort, she managed both, then sank moaning against her back door. Miraculously, it opened and Sarah was there to pull her inside.

"I was too worried to sleep, Letitia," she said. "My goodness, you're in awful shape! What happened? Can't you speak?"

Miss Kennedy gave one last moan and made an obvious effort to pull herself together. That was why she had quit going through doors in the first place. It spread one out so.

"Speak?" repeated Miss Letitia Kennedy faintly. "Why, thank you, I shall be delighted to speak. Ladies and gentlemen. I have just returned from a visit to a humaned house. And I can truthfully say, ladies and gentlemen, that real humans are far more horrible than than any of your imaginary humans ever were."

*D. V. Gilder*



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